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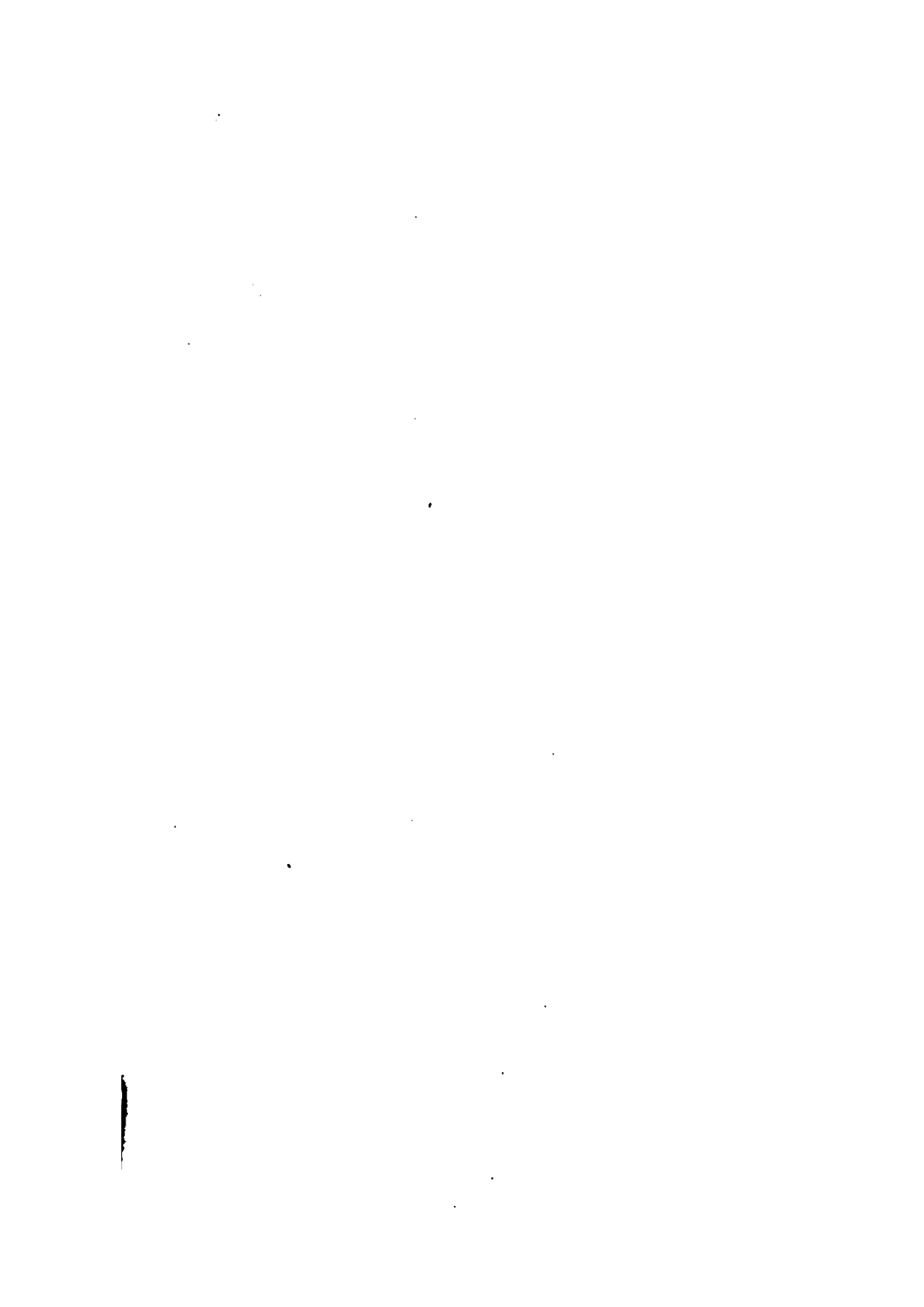
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Improper Prue

BY
GLORIA MANNING

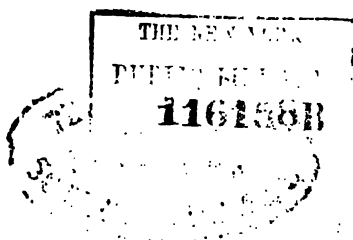
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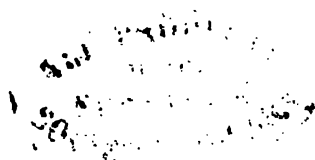
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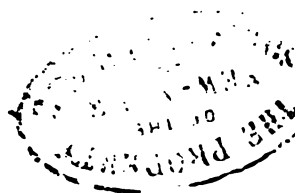
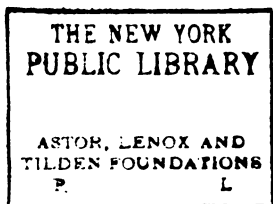
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PRUE

FEB 20 1909

IMPROPER PRUE

CHAPTER I

"At last!" pouted Prue. "Didn't I tell you you were to come at once, *whatever* you were doing?"

The middle-aged solicitor sat down with an air of irritation. "I'm not one to forget my responsibilities," he said stiffly, "and considering I hurried away from a client in St. John's Wood——"

Prue dimpled audaciously. "St. John's Wood," she interrupted. "I thought that was where one left one's—*ir*-responsibilities!"

"Really, Prudence——" began Austin Hargraves angrily.

"And is the 'client' dark or fair, Toby, dear?" she continued.

Mr. Hargraves gave an impatient exclamation. Prue Maunsell, not content with frequently bringing the blush to his sallow cheek, would call him Toby for no reason whatever

as far as he could see. It was not a dignified title, and Austin Hargraves, family solicitor, prided himself upon his dignity, standing firmly upon it. Perhaps he was wise, inasmuch as he had little else to stand upon.

He considered it unseemly Prue should call him anything but "Mr. Hargraves," but she said as he was the only relation she possessed in the world—he was perhaps a tenth cousin—she was going to call him by his Christian name of Toby.

"My Christian name is Austin," he had returned, exasperated.

"Because you were christened wrong, cousin mine, and now you are Toby by the grace of Prue"; and Toby the smarting man remained. The St. John's Wood insinuation irritated less than the repetition of his detested nickname.

"Why have you sent for me?" he asked rather sharply. "Surely you have not anticipated your quarter again?"

"How sordid you are! Always thinking about money. Now, I never think about it at all."

"Quite unnecessary to tell me that. I only wish you would. Well, what is it?"

"I want an invitation to Malden Court, and you've got to get it for me. You've had to fish the Maldens out of nasty places, I suspect; anyway, I happen to know you've but to ask to obtain in that quarter. Mention their disreputable secrets, or, if that's not enough, add that my grandmother was Patty Demoleyns of County Cork. That ought to do the trick. And I'm quite as pretty as my famous grandmother."

"The most disreputable house in the kingdom, with a vile old man for host."

"Exactly! It's sure to be amusing, and one gets so tired of respectability."

"You call your life here, a girl living alone in a flat, doing all manner of outrageous things, respectability?"

"What else can it be, Toby-mine, when you belong to it, and come to see me ever so often?"

He coloured, moving uneasily. Too well he knew that he came often—very often.

"I will not get you the invitation"; and he set his thin lips. "No really decent woman goes there."

"I shall be the exception, then, for I am going. I can write to Sir Peter myself, ask if

he remembers my grandmother, and say I am quite as nice, and would like to know him."

"Heavens! He will think——"

"The worst! Of course he will—thanks to you."

"If only you weren't so imprudent!" burst from him.

"If only you wouldn't make idiotic puns!"

"As if I meant anything so silly!" he exclaimed after a moment's puzzled thought. "Look here, Prue, you can't keep up with that set on four hundred a year."

"I've been reading how to win at bridge."

"More discreditable ways! As if to be found alone in a man's chambers wasn't enough."

He dug his hands angrily in his pockets.

"I wasn't alone. The man was there. How silly you are, Toby! And it was a rippin' dinner, and he let me have all the flowers to take home, and a box of Fuller's chocolates. Besides, it wasn't our fault we were dropped in upon——"

"By the biggest gossip of the Bachelors'——"

"Another time I'll ask my host to tell his man to keep the outer door locked, and guard

the stairs," she said penitently, "and that will make it all right, won't it, Toby, dear?"

"It will make it a—a"—he paused and swallowed something, while Prue put down her tea-cup with an air of excitement—"a great deal worse," he finished lamely.

"I thought you were going to use a little swear at last," she sighed, disappointed.

"Some of these days you'll be losing your reputation," he said gravely.

"*Where?*" she asked, interested. "In St. John's Wood, Toby—eh? Then I'll apply whitewash. What form should you advise? Church, curates, or red-flannel petticoats for virtuous old women? Why are red-flannel petticoats a sign of outrageous virtue, Toby? I made that up myself, but I don't know the answer except that they *are*. I should cut 'em up—the petticoats, not the curates—and bestow 'em upon rheumatically old dears. I only hope I'd sew 'em right, because it would be awkward if the old dears could only get one leg in at a time, so that they'd have to take it in turns with their legs. Or, in case of accidents, would you advise the sort of petticoats with *two* legs?"

The unhappy Austin, who had been brought

up by two rigidly proper maiden aunts blushed again, avoiding Prue's dancing eyes and demoniac dimple.

"Why will you talk such—rubbish?" he lamented.

"To make life a jest instead of a burden."

"A jest to you; a burden to others."

"That was almost smart, Toby."

"An—er—attractive young girl living alone in a flat——"

"Better in a flat, than *with* one," she sighed.

He looked shocked.

"Oh, what a wicked mind you have, Toby-ums," she said regretfully. "Of course I meant in holy matrimony."

"If you were married now——"

"Oh, Toby! Are you really going to ask me—at last?" and she clasped her hands joyfully.

The luckless Austin flushed, and gazed at her in trepidation.

Marriage with Prue was a peril to be guarded against at all costs. Alas, that it was such an alluring one!

"I should never think of such a thing," he said at length, very stiffly.

"I've known men like that, married all in a

hurry, before now," she retorted. Then she put her handkerchief to her wonderful golden eyes. "How cruel you are!" she gulped.

"I regard marriage," he said pompously—if hastily—"as a serious—a very serious thing——"

"For the wife or you?" she inquired. "Do you know, Toby, I believe you'll end up with a wife with a nonconformist conscience and religious boots. The sort of person who not only believes in the early Victorian heaven, but actually wants to go there."

"I hate profanity!" he frowned.

"You hate so many things, you poor old dear, and I love everything—save respectability. Look at Miss Higgins; she can go anywhere, do everything, just because she is a journalist. It isn't fair."

"Probably Miss Higgins thinks so too," he said dryly, as a mental picture of that daughter of the gods, ungainly tall and most beauty-bare, rose before him.

"Frights may step in where beauty must not tread," he said quickly, proud of his apt "wit." And Prue was always hinting he was slow and stupid!

"You'll lose your clients if you shine like

that," she cried warningly, "and will owe it to yourself to embezzle and get off scot-free. But about the men who want to marry me—there are twenty-five and a half at present. You are the half——"

"But I don't want——" he began startled.

"Don't want to *want* to marry me. I know, Tobyums. That's why I only put you down as half. If the worst comes to the worst, and next 'quarter's' is constantly reported 'missing,' I shall have to toss up for it and marry—the loser."

Austin hesitated, went scarlet, rose hastily, and with a flurried farewell made for the lift.

"Some of these days——" he groaned in panic, and cowardice refused to finish the sentence.

CHAPTER II

THREE days later he brought the precious invitation, as Prue knew he would.

She danced round the room, and once when he thought she was going to fling her arms round his neck, he dashed out of her reach. Not being made of stone, he feared he might reciprocate, and then she would expect him to propose, which nothing would ever induce him to do.

She began to talk rapidly, taking no notice of his remarks. "I wish you wouldn't talk so much," he exclaimed, at length exasperated.

"It would be selfish for such a brilliant conversationalist to refrain. Still, I must remember no man will ever really love me unless I let *him* do the shining."

"I think you will drive me mad!" he exploded.

"But not like Uncle Will? Oh, Toby, surely a respectable family solicitor to the best families and peeresses, with side whiskers—I

don't mean *they* have the side whiskers—would never take to barking and biting! I'm sure it wouldn't go down with the clients."

"How can you make fun of such a horrible thing as hydrophobia!" he cried aghast.

"It wasn't hydrophobia—he only thought it was."

"But he barked and bit, just the same."

"Of course you could have a special ledge for the clients to climb on—if they were spry—in your offices," she said thoughtfully; "but if it had been Uncle Will he'd have been there first. I think he was the most active man I ever saw—poor old dear!"

Before Prue's appearance in London some three years previously, she had lived in a country village with her uncle, a retired Indian colonel, and his languid wife. They were all the parents she had ever known, and, save for Austin Hargraves, the only relations she possessed in the world.

Privately she considered most people considerably overdone with the relation element.

When she grew up she found her life very irksome in that quiet village, a condition which was not improved by her poor uncle's eccentricities; but knowing that her income made all

the difference to the Maunsells—for Colonel Maunsell had nothing but his pension—she had thought it her duty to stay on, even while her heart longed for London and a larger, freer life. Only twice had they left Sleepy Hollow to spend a couple of summers in Beaumaris, once when she was eight, and then again ten years later.

The “mad” colonel and his invalid wife were decidedly trying for any one possessed of such desire of life as Prue, for they gave neither companionship nor extensive love.

The poor old gentleman was not to blame, for the terrible sunstroke which had struck him down in India, just before his retirement, left him queer in many ways. He was, in fact, harmlessly, if alarmingly, insane. He insisted he had been bitten by a mad dog and suffered from what he called “incipient hydrophobia.”

“By Gad, Maria, you’ll see!” he would shout to his wife several times in the day. “Think they may come to the house as they like, do they? I’ll soon show ’em. *I’ll* bark ’em out of it.”

Which was exactly what he did.

At sight of a human being venturing up the path, the colonel would drop on all-fours and

rush agilely towards the intruder, barking so realistically that all his own tribe of dogs rushed out in a herd. The visitor usually fled with a scream, and the old gentleman would return to the house in an erect position, rubbing his hands and chuckling, and burst upon his wife drowsing on her sofa.

"By Gad! I told you I'd bark 'em out of it," he would say triumphantly. "I nearly got his leg that time."


And his languid wife always drawled the same answer: "Oh, Will, for shame! Oh, *poor* old boy! I wish you wouldn't."

"I've got to teach 'em to respect me," he would answer.

And "respect" him they did—by keeping their distance.

The tradespeople dropped their orders over the hedge, and hurried away, after a shrill whistle to let the cook understand; but the dogs also understood, and sometimes that which had been intended for a joint was served up as hash. At least, so people said.

It was a strange life for Prue Maunsell, with her beautiful face, magnetic personality, and passionate joy of life, but for twenty-three years she knew no other.



The village, like many, was chiefly inhabited by single and rather stupid women. The unmarried male population consisted of several boys, one confirmed old bachelor, a widower who was not really sorry, and one eligible.

There was also, of course, a curate.

And there were quite thirty women anxious to marry! There were also men across the seas eager for English wives but unable to come for them, the result being the loss of many English children yearly to the nation, and the gradual absorption of English blood into less desirable channels. It is a problem which might pay Great Britain to solve. And while Prue remained, these poor ladies had a bad time of it, for the boys, the old bachelor (deadly reluctant, but helpless), the widower who had never been really sorry (and now was glad), and the eligible (humbly, though he had been as a god for years), laid all that they had—and much that they hadn't—at the pretty, imperious feet of Prue.

Also, of course, the curate (as a sheep to the slaughter).

And the bachelor became more “confirmed” than ever, while the widower for the first time *was* sorry, and the eligible angry and sur-

prised. The boys knew their hearts were broken, and one, who was barely seventeen, cried, and scarcely ate for two days. (That he lived to marry a pork butcher's widow is neither here nor there.)

For Prue always said no. She had had enough of the village and panted to try her wings in a bigger world.

The suitors usually proposed over the hedge—on the safe side of it—for, though they were taken with Prue, they did not want to be bitten by the colonel; and Prue named the particular spot the Vale of Weeping.

All this did not add to the girl's comfort, for the rejected sulked and asked her again, and the other ladies ignored her, calling her "that bold Maunsell girl," and "hoped" that madness was not in the family.

Prue was only sixteen when she received her first proposal, and the same man asked her again just before she left the village seven years later, so she really was a trifle tired of Sleepy Hollow.

"The women," she said frankly, "are just sheep, and silly sheep at that; they haven't even the wit to go astray, or the gumption to seek pastures new if they want to get married.

They believe in marrying and hanging going by destiny, and husbands dropping from the skies, and they deserve what they get—which is nothing.”

She was not always kind in her youthful beauty and arrogance. She was plucky and progressive herself, and could not understand the type of person who sits down with folded hands waiting for “something to turn up.” Later she attained to a wider charity.

She told her uncle that half the inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow were silly sheep, and he not only agreed with her, but assured her with a fierce air that if the sheep came browsing in his pastures he knew a certain mad dog which would worry the sheep, farmers or no farmers, and pay the fine, too, by Gad, and be damned to it!

The languid aunt died first, leaving Prue some lovely and valuable pearls, and the eccentric colonel grew stranger than ever. He would dart to his wife’s sofa to announce his intention of “barkin’ ’em out of it, by Gad,” and groan to find it empty, his purpose forgotten. He survived Mrs. Maunsell only a very short time, dying suddenly and quite peacefully, a very meek, lovable old gentleman in

his last moments, sane for the first time in many years.

Prue was thus left alone in the world at twenty-three with an income of four hundred a year, roughly speaking, a small sum left her by her uncle in the bank, and all the Sheraton, old china and foreign articles he had collected.

Laden with these possessions, she came up to London to take the great capital by storm, and succeeded as far as her own portion of it was concerned, for all the inhabitants of the huge block of flats wherein she found her domicile were entirely subjugated by Prue—even those strongly disapproving refused to believe actual harm of her. She was accompanied by Martha, her uncle's middle-aged cook, who fully expected her to marry a duke; and Bub, short for Beelzebub, the most impish of all the tribe of dogs.

And she brought something else as well, something priceless—a most marvellous *joie de vivre*, which is more than fame or fortune, than princes or palaces, than love, or all the kingdoms of the sea, for the richest of the earth cannot buy even the counterfeit of it.

This combined with her beauty, her audacity, undoubted fascination, and something strange-

ly illusive about her personality, made her a human magnet, and she had friends by the dozen, lovers by the score. The unattached young men came home from the city and spent most of their time going up and down in the lift on the chance of "coming across" Miss Maunsell (though I believe they called her Prue to themselves). And Prue, who knew all about it, was sometimes kind and went down in the lift, too. Occasionally—oh, bliss!—she even asked them in to tea. And her rooms were always ablaze with flowers she did not buy. Besides the men in the flats, there was the eligible from her old village, who still "looked her up" frequently—which was his way of alluding to "chronic rejection"—and some of the men who had been connected with her uncle's regimental life (or pretended they had); so she scarcely suffered from neglect.

There was also her great friend, Jane Thompson, and Mrs. Stanley. But she yearned for other fields to conquer; she was no more specially anxious to marry a duke than any other beauty, but she wished to have the option of doing so.

She wanted to exploit the so-called "smart

set," and Sir Peter was one of the least *re-*table of that clan.

She had got, as she always did, her way, *and* the invitation lay in her hand.

Once more she jumped for joy, and made another rush at Mr. Hargraves, and again he dodged. "Oh, Toby, you are rather a dear, after all!" she cried.

"What more do you want?" he growled.

"Only my next after the *next* quarter's," she coaxed. "One cannot go into society a rag-bag."

As she already had a collection of rather wonderful frocks, this was an absurd way of speaking, and Mr. Hargraves said so.

"Besides, my dear girl," he added impatiently, "you are not going into society. Society in the real sense has little to do with the 'smart set,' which is the flotsam of all classes possessing sufficient money, impudence, and a paucity of decency. Sir Peter's lot is barred at Court, you know."

"Friskier and friskier!" she cried, delighted.

"Your innate good sense will show you how little these people are to be liked, much less coaxed," he went on. "Your acquaintance will

cure you; that's why I've given in, for at heart, Prue, you are *not* a rake."

Prue looked offended. "I'm *awfully* rakey," she declared. "Just you wait a bit! Perhaps I shall have the chance of subjugating a duke or an earl and being a most awfully duchessy duchess. Then you shall have all our business, Toby-mine. Won't that be nice? Oh, I must go and tell only-Jane about it. She'll be awfully excited. She always talks of dukes with bated breath"; and she danced out on to the landing to the next-door flat.

CHAPTER III

THE block of flats that Prue had finally decided in favour of was a fairly central huge new building with every convenience. The rents ran from £90 to £300, the size of the flats beginning at three rooms and going up to twelve. In many instances two women or two men shared one.

Prue paid £100 for four rooms, bathroom and kitchen, and was well satisfied with her bargain, for even if two of the rooms were small, and one tiny, they all got plenty of air and sun. She had her flat decorated to suit the Sheraton and old china, and her little home was infinitely the daintiest in Mammoth Mansions.

The best room made an exquisite drawing-room; the next largest became her bedroom and presented a view of many wardrobes, mirrors, and all the vanities of a vain and lovely woman.

The third made a cosy dining-room, where

four could be squeezed in for a meal. The fourth room was of course Martha's bedroom, while the kitchen was as good as a flat kitchen ever is, and had a gas-stove and fair oven. Altogether, Prue, with her luxuriously furnished flat, and her own servant, was looked upon as a young woman of importance and property.

Even the mistress of the £300 flat, a lady of haughty mien, owing to the fact that her husband made over £1500 a year in a firm of chandlers, decided to call, having two sons who demanded birth, beauty, fortune, and a few other essentials in their wives—possibly to make up for their own lack of all.

So Mrs. Chandler called, tried to be condescending, and got severely snubbed, returning to the bosom of her family in a great state of indignation, denouncing Prue as a hussy whom she should not encourage. Prue did not give her the chance, for she never returned the call. She was, without doubt, the rudest girl in London.

"Why be bored?" she would ask. "Life is not long enough or sweet enough. That way sin and failure and all manner of things lie. The uncongenial bore—it may be your fault, or it may be the fault of the uncongenial—but

anyway avoid them. Also, Mrs. Chandler is a fool, and I never suffer fools gladly. One must draw the line. I don't mind vulgarity—I can enjoy it; or homeliness—the homely have usually kind hearts; but 'the thin veneer of gentility of the vulgar-minded' is to me absolutely the limit, and when you have stupidity and bumptiousness combined——" She broke off with a shrug.


Jane Thompson owned the lady under discussion was "not very nice."

"Are the two ratty-faced, sandy-haired young men, who look like volunteer captains or one of those sort of things which have such queer legs, her sons? Because if so, only-Jane, I shall not marry 'em were it ever so."

Jane Thompson laughed, gazing at Prue as a mortal at a god.

Prue had made her acquaintance in a characteristic fashion the second day of her arrival, for Bub had found the shoes of the lady next door, and presented their chewed remains with great pride to his mistress.

"Oh, Bubby, you shouldn't!" said the girl, dismayed. "Now I must go and apologise, and perhaps the severe spinster will bite off my head."



She knew that the two ladies who shared the next flat were a Mrs. Stanley, widow of an Indian officer, and a Miss Thompson, a young old maid.

Prue knocked at the door of her neighbour, entering breathlessly, the shoes in her hands. "Oh, are you Miss Thompson, and are these yours?" she cried.

The little, sallow woman smiled. "Yes, I am Jane Thompson," she said.

"Of course you are Jane!" exclaimed Prue impetuously. "That must inevitably be your name; and I'm sure you are an only-Jane, too."

Miss Thompson stared at the radiant beauty. "Oh, I have brothers and two married sisters," she replied, "so you see you've guessed wrong."

"No, right," said Prue, smiling; "for that was exactly what I meant—I mean the married sisters. And they are younger than you, and matrons triumphant, not to say brass-bandish, and when things go wrong—the cook leaves, or the children get measles, or the husbands the hump in the husbandly way—they send for you to straighten out things. And no matter how inconvenient, you invariably go. And you always work very hard. And you don't get much in the way of thanks. For it

is your duty, and you are 'only-Jane' and unmarried. They are rather sorry for you in a condescending way. And when you were all girls, if there wasn't enough of anything, pretty clothes, or parties, or young men, or husbands, well—there was one who did without, and made no fuss about it. It did not matter about 'only-Jane.' Now, haven't I second-sight or intuition to an extraordinary extent, so that I read the human soul as an open book? And aren't I awfully rude; but will you forgive me and be friends—real friends—and let me call you only-Jane? I am Prue Maunsell, and I haven't any married sisters or anybody—thank goodness—or any manners, as you can see, or morals, or principles or other tiresome superfluities. And you and I are such opposites we must be meant for friends." She paused, reluctantly, for breath.

"I think you are a witch!" gasped Jane Thompson, her face flushed with amaze, "because all you have said is exactly true. I *am* only-Jane, though I did not know it before. And, my dear, how lovely you are! You cannot want a dull old foggy like me for a friend; we are creatures of different moulds—the perfect china case, and the dingy old pot——"

"Do you like old china?" asked Prue, and, without waiting for an answer, ran away to return with an exquisite old vase.

"Please will you have this?" she begged, offering it; "and we are friends, aren't we? Of course I was right about you. I always am about people; it's quite uncanny at times. I see them as they are, instead of what they think they are or want you to think they are. Sometimes I am afraid I shall never get married in consequence, and I always mean to, because of having sons and one little daughter as pretty as I am. It's such a waste for a beauty not to pass it on. The thing is to find the right father—oh, you look quite shocked! But you mustn't mind me; I always say what I think, and never think anything worse than I say, which I firmly believe is better than the other and more usual way 'round. People call me 'Improper Prue,' and I like it, because I only do unconventional things at the worst. But it's friendship, isn't it?"

And friendship it was, from that hour till the day the little spinster, after a long career of usefulness and thankless work for others, was laid to rest in a grave that would have been cheap if it hadn't been for Prue, and went to

a haven where there were neither married sisters nor frequent infants with perpetual measles.

Jane and Prue became almost inseparables, and a new era dawned for Jane Thompson. She worshipped the beautiful Miss Maunsell, and would cheerfully have laid down her life for her.

Mrs. Stanley also became enthusiastic on the score of Prue, and openly regretted she hadn't a son for the beauty to marry. She had however, two nephews in the Service, and these she offered up gladly, the said nephews suddenly becoming most devoted to their aunt. The rather flighty lady had known Colonel Maunsell before his terrible illness, in India, and looked upon Prue almost as a relative.

Jane sniffed hideously when Prue announced her departure to Malden Court, though she tried to be glad for the girl's sake. "I know how it will be," she lamented. "You will marry your duke, then I shall never see you again. You will move in elevated circles——"

"*Inflated*, it seems," corrected Prue. "Of course, 'Her Grace' will ignore all her former low friends and treat her 'only-Janes' as mere

worms. Still, she'll send for you when his ducal worship gets the hump, and the future duke the collywobbles——"

"Oh, Prue! It sounds almost profane to talk like that of a 'grace,' like blasphemy and breaking into a church, and things like that."

"You dear silly! Of course it would be called appendicitis, and the king's physician would attend, and order" [in an aside] "hot bricks, while the papers would announce that fortunately the gracious appendix would not require removing after all. There, what a lot of 'etiquette' I know already!"

"Because your grandmother belonged to those sort of people," said Jane despondently.

"But most of my other things didn't," said Prue; "what there were of them. Look at Toby, the only relative left. Is there anything more middle-class and respectable in the world than a family solicitor?—unless, of course, he's brilliant and embezzles; but Toby doesn't believe in progression."

"You've taken after your grandmother, Prue; that's certain. She was a famous beauty, but I don't believe she could have been as wonderfully lovely as you."

"I don't believe it, either," said Prue.

"It's difficult to think of you as the same flesh and blood as Mr. Hargraves——"

"Alas! impossible! *'Ye twain shall be as one flesh.'* But *he* won't. Never mind, let's hope the duke will prove less *difficile*; anyway, Toby's been an experience and good practice."

"And the duke will be young, handsome, good, devoted——" began the romantic Jane, perhaps mainly romantic because she wasn't married—least of all to men like her brother-in-laws.

"Come, Madam Unsophisticated, it would be sheer arrogance for a man to be anything beyond a mere duke. His obligation begins and ends with that, and of course to be in a position to make a duchess . . . I shall wear flesh-coloured satin and priceless lace at the wedding, and my aunt's pearls, and have twenty little children dressed and blacked for page-boys. Won't it be a duck of a wedding, and so original! Do you think the duke would mind getting blacked too? 'Specially if he's ugly, which he's sure to be. I know I should want to carry off all the darling niggers instead of the duke on the honeymoon——"

"And he'd probably let you," said Jane drily.

CHAPTER IV

So PRUE departed radiant to Malden Hall with many promises to write a long letter at the end of the week, and hide nothing, not even the hovering duke, from her only-Jane.

The hall was full of people standing about in groups and having tea when she arrived, and she was glad of it. Prue, it must be owned, liked making effective entrances, and her travelling costume was, if not expensive, perfect in all other detail.

The women turned with a frown, the men with a smile, as she swept gracefully towards her hostess.

Lady Malden gasped and shook hands; then Sir Peter came quickly forward.

"I remember your grandmother, the second loveliest woman in the world," he said, pressing Prue's slim fingers and drawing her towards a distant recess. "If you'll look in the glass you'll see the first. You mustn't mind an old man's frankness. The Stud Book spoils all my chances, but I don't look sixty-five, do I?"

"You don't look forty!" she exclaimed—truthfully enough.

So this was the famous and successful *roué*—just a little Puck-like man with the face of some mischievous sprite. (She found afterwards he went by the name of Puck.) Out of his dark face, vivid with extraordinary vitality, gleamed two small, intensely blue eyes, the exact colour of turquoises; his mouth was well shaped and humorous, but cruelty and viciousness lurked at the corners. He was the more dangerous that no one—at first—took him seriously. He cast the glamour of humour over everything, and people who would otherwise have been shocked or warned, laughed. He was small built, this Lothario of five-foot-three, but possessed wiry strength, and, apparently, the secret of eternal youth.

He believed in nothing or nobody. He was as big a scoundrel as the country held, but because he was often amusing in an audacious way, good-natured where his own comfort was not affected, and had a delightful place to stay at, people either did not, or would not, realise his criminality, and his friends and acquaintances were legion.

"I'm a materialist," he would say, "and make no pretences. Give me the tangible, others are welcome to the intangible. I only want the things within reach. People with noble ambitions are always trying too high a flight and hurting themselves. It's a bore to hurt oneself." His mission was rather to hurt others.

"There are two sorts of indigestion," was another of his acid words of wisdom; "the sort you get from want, and the sort you get from surfeit. The wise man suffers for the cake eaten (which was at least pleasant in the eating), and the fool for the cake foregone."

In fact, he clothed the truth in humour and brutality, but it still remained the truth. And that was why better people retired defeated in argument.

Lady Malden was a very stout, plain dame with a flat face, of a rigid and pious life. Sir Peter was the host who counted at Malden. Her husband called her the devil-dowdger, "because," as he explained to Prue, his wicked eyes twinkling, "she's half a dowager, now Stephen is married, and wholly a dodger of the devil." "Who'll get her in the end," he added, chuckling.

"The devil-dowdger wasn't *always* so par-

ticular," he said one day to Prue, pinching her arm, and looking more like a Satanic imp than ever. "She waited till she was old and cold and grey like most of 'em, and temptation fled instead of followed. As a matter of fact, my dear, it isn't holiness, it's whitewash, and if you were to do a little scraping, she'd be rather grimy underneath. Ask her about old Tommy Redcliffe. Oh, yes, he's fat and gouty now, but once he and the 'dow' were less than kin and more than kind. And I'm not the only one who thinks my third son's nose is a funny shape. So is old Tommy's. The devil-dowdger thinks she's thrown dust in all our eyes, but only because her own head is in the sand. I call him the 'heir of Redcliffe' behind backs sometimes. The D.-D. is in terror of my finding out, but 'love and let love' is my motto. I pretend crass ignorance and break in on dangerous ground. But you should see her face when I get 'warm,' as the seekers say. Ha, what a funny world we live in!"

Prue was a little shocked and drew back. "Is it funny," she asked, "when one comes to that pass when one believes 'not even Lancelot brave, nor Arthur clean'? I think it is horrible. I should hate to wade in mire, never to raise

my eyes from it, and see the clear sky or beautiful flowers growing out of the soil—only their roots are in the mire; the rest, the best, has risen above it. Is that funny, Sir Peter?"

"No; only very dull, my dear. But the thing that shows above is what the world sees; it is there to take us in. The real life lies hidden below."

"But the face is turned up to the skies," said Prue softly, "to the sun and the wind and the rain. And people pluck and cherish the flowers, but the roots are thrown in the dung-heap. And only pigs dig there!"

"But every Circe has her troop of swine," he yawned.

On the day she arrived, however, Prue did not learn all this from Sir Peter.

He brought her tea, stood by her, and, catching her eye, smiled. "You're Improper Prue, and I'm improper, too," he said; "and we should have a letter to-morrow."

"Who told you my nickname?"

"Your eyes," he grinned.

Those same eyes began to consider the company present.

"A catalogue at your service," he suggested. "Whom shall we start with?"

She looked towards the man who had roused her interest from the first, and made a sign indicating the woman who stood next to him.

"Who is the lady with tight stays and middle-class married feet?"

"You've got her!" chuckled Sir Peter. "Name of Morris. Owns mills and husband—the short, fat man who hates the 'swells' and is never happy outside the provinces—also very many votes. Votes got my eldest son, who isn't a genius, into Parliament, and Mrs. Morris into Malden Hall. She has social ambitions, and dare not be herself or fat, and tries to hide a nonconformist conscience. She spends her time trying not to look shocked and new stays. Her nose is stays, not drink. That's Colonel Wylde at the back; he loves bridge, dislikes women, is a bachelor, and intends to remain one, D. V.—or not. The fat old gentleman with the nose is Tommy Redcliffe; some day I'll point out the heir of Redcliffe to you if you'll promise to keep mum, but I don't feel I know you well enough yet."

"I think I can find him," said Prue, innocently. "He's got just the same sort of nose," and she pointed to a rather curate-like looking young man.

"That's my third son, Peter, the only one who is called after me," said Sir Peter, chuckling, and Prue went scarlet.

"We call him the apostle to distinguish him from me," went on Sir Peter, still chuckling. "Some day as I promised I may tell you his other name——"

Prue reddened again, though she wanted to laugh, there was such a comical look on the speaker's face.

"We are hoping he may marry an heiress shortly; he's been refused by two, and the third time is always lucky. Otherwise, as he's rather under-developed, we'll have to put him in the Church; but we're hoping he and Lady Trevor may fix it up. That is Lady Trevor talking to the thin, severe-looking woman—Mrs. Tommy."

"But Lady Trevor is old enough to be his mother!" gasped Prue.

"Older! You should see her without her wig! Once when I wanted to see what all the women looked like in retirement, I raised an alarm of fire, and Lady Trevor forgot her wig. One way and another several things were forgotten; the right rooms in some instances. But I'll tell you about the fire another time. It was

very funny—to a looker-on. An undress rehearsal of morals as well as clothes. Lady Trevor has had three husbands—hard luck on the girls when they are so short, isn't it?—and when she buried her last, people said it was a contract job, so many at so much, and everybody is dying to find out the number contracted for, for several hard-ups wouldn't mind being the last, but bar worse risks. The apostle, however, is an optimist and believes in the survival of the youngest. That sad-faced girl is Jenny Trevor. She's over thirty and her father was poor, so she's likely to go on being bridesmaid for her mother, I fancy. She tries to make a joke of it—plucky girl—but really she finds it tragic. Pity she's plain and dowdy.”

“Nature meant her to be neither,” said Prue quickly. “She does not trouble, that is all. I think she has a sweet face, and her soft, dark-blue eyes are really lovely.”

“Whom else shall I ticket?” And he watched her sharply.

“Ninty-nine girls out of a hundred would have avoided, or appeared to avoid, enquiring as to handsome Captain Jim Lascelles, but Prue was the hundredth.

"The handsome guardsman," she said instantly.

"Who happens to be a hussar, captain in the —th; he's also a sort of cousin of mine, doubtless rather a disadvantage to a man who is by way of being a saint or something eccentric of that sort. He is also cousin to two dukes, which, with his ideas of economy, must be equally trying."

"Is he heir to one of the dukes?"

Sir Peter smiled cynically. "Not by a long way," he retorted; "they both have sons, one grandsons. I'm sorry, Miss Maunsell."

"But I am sorrier," dimpled Prue. "Isn't it a pity? I don't mind owning to you, Sir Peter, that, being a beauty, I cherish the hope of marrying a duke."

"It would be odd if you didn't," said Sir Peter, "and I'd help you if I could, but, alas! we do not move in ducal circles. I don't know whether it's the fault of the present dukes or their duchesses, but they seem a sadly respectable lot—or wish to appear so. Anyway, they don't seem able to afford to know us."

"What is the name of your good-looking cousin?"

"James, better known as Jim, Lascelles, and

if you're going to fall in love with him, I'd better warn you to walk circumspect-like, and whatever you do keep the eleventh commandment and not be found out. He's an awful prig, and I only asked him because he's a first-class shot and polo-player."

"A sportsman if a prig?" lightly.

"Oh, yes," grudgingly. "Sir Galahad is that, but his array of morals, principles, and other obsolete horrors, are terrible. He won't make love to a married woman because it's naughty, or to a girl unless he wants to marry her. And he insists on living on his absurd income of £500 in the —th Hussars, and doing without anything he can't pay for. He might have had a dissenting minister for a father. Of course he will have to marry money in the end, though I dare say that's against his principles, too—not that I wonder when one views some of the heiresses. Still, he'll come to it in the end."

"Of course," agreed Prue. "What other disabilities does he suffer from?"

"Thinks women are angels."

"So some of them are," cried Prue. "You should know my only-Jane."

"I'd rather know Prue, *my* Prue-only," he whispered.

He claimed for himself all the privileges of old age, but none of its dignities.

And he found women very easy victims on the whole. He had marked Prue down from the first instant she entered the hall.

CHAPTER V

WELL, my only-Jane, here's to you and respectability, which I've discarded just at present. There's nothing so absolutely scrummy as a thoroughly disreputable feeling. Behold, I am keeping my word to write all my adventures, and you will beam with joy when this bulky package reaches you—till you begin to read.

Then I fear you will frown (if you were a naughty Jane there would also be many a big D), for I have a way of putting the first last and the last first; also much is set down in malice, while explanations are usually omitted.

In fact, I am a very feminine letter-writer, and as the "Compleat Digressor" would be a great success.

I have a lot to tell you, much that is interesting, more that is shocking, and a great deal of what is amusing—to me.

But I will be firm with myself, so this letter is going to be all facts and no fancies. Also

as promised I will be frank (which does not in this instance mean being personally rude).

Have you ever noticed how one cringes inwardly when a friend starts with those ominous words: "Now I'm going to be perfectly frank"?

That sentence is of the devil; and failures, suicides, marriages to the wrong person, and such-like horrors are the fruits thereof. If after you have read and your head swims, please remember it is better to be inconsequent than consequential.

Well, dear Toby got a comfy carriage for me, and must have spent a portion of his two thousand a year he is so vainglorious about, and keeps to himself as far as I am concerned. (You know what I mean—a matrimonial hope gone wrong.)

There were lots of people in the hall, and I was able to make an effective entry. I wished Sir Peter young, charming and single, for "Baronial Halls" would set off my beauty nicely. He was very nice to me. He calls Lady Malden the "D. D." for short—of *course*, meaning "dear darling," and made a remark about his third son's nose I really cannot repeat to my particular Jane. How I wish you

were just a trifle more "rakey!" The third son, Peter, also called the apostle and the heir of Redcliffe, which I dare say sounds silly till you know, is hampered by being dreadfully Christian-looking, and so he's been refused by two heiresses, but he seems to be getting on fast with Lady Trevor, who is rich; they say his life is a good one, so I dare say he'll risk it. Old Tommy wants it, of course; it would be such a good provision, and the Tommy Redcliffes have several little girls and not much money.

I'm glad you don't understand, for it's very shocking, and perhaps it isn't true, though the shape *is* the same. Everybody calls him old Tommy, and his wife keeps him in order, because once he usen't to be very particular. He comes here just the same as ever so that people won't talk. Sir Peter says he regards him as a family connection, but that's just one of his horrid jokes, which you won't understand either, only-Jane.

Sir Peter keeps bloodhounds, and Lady Malden curates, and Sir Peter says they are best fun mixed. . . .

The long thin one got away first. . . .

(Sir Peter let them out, and put aniseed or something on their clothes; it made one think

of ancient days.) Everyone enjoyed it except Lady Malden and the curates, who are not a sporting lot. They haven't been here so often lately, and Sir Peter says it's very odd, and wonders how the bloodhounds got out and the curates' stuff on their clothes. (The grammar has got a little wrong, but you know what I mean.) Talking about curates, one of them was arguing on the derivation of the word "woman" because Colonel Wylde had said it meant the woe of a man, and I said:

"You've both got it wrong. She was called whoa-man, meaning 'go-slow-man'; but she wouldn't."

And they all laughed and said I was very smart, and by Jove! she didn't.

Colonel Wylde is a fine-looking man with a nose—I don't mean the Tommy sort. He hates women and is quite determined to die a bachelor, and because he's very well off and rather good-looking and not over fifty he knows he will have a fight for it. Lady Trevor tried to catch him, but he calls her the polygamist and says awful things about her in the smoking-room. (She listened at the door, thinking the men were going to tell the sort of tales I imagine she made her husbands repeat to her—

horrid woman! I always fly from the room when she starts her "stories." But they were talking about her in a way that made the red come through her rouge, and she hasn't listened since.) It serves her right, *whatever* they said. She is very fond of talking about men.

She says there are only two sorts: the ones you marry and the ones you don't, and that the latter are the only ones of any interest. She says the most agreeable of men are disagreeable as husbands. The worst of Lady Trevor is, her experience gives her words weight. I don't believe half of them, but how can a spinster argue about husbands with a woman who has had three and contemplates a fourth, D. V.—or otherwise?

The other afternoon in the drawing-room she gave us quite a lecture, while poor Jenny listened with such an odd expression in her eyes.

"Men differ, lovers alter, but all husbands are the same," she began. "I've had three and I know. As men they were direct opposites—that was why I married them; as husbands they were merely No. 1 and 2 and 3. In essentials they came down to the root of things, being neither good nor bad, agreeable or disagreeable, types or individuals, merely husbands."

And I didn't believe her because I wouldn't, for mine is going to be the one and only set apart!

I suppose that illusion may possibly last three months; yet it will be something to have had a little worth while, to be bathed in the light that never was on land or sea. For I am going to marry neither for place nor power—though I should like him to have both—but for love, only love, and entirely love. In fact, I have every intention of being a fool, albeit a divine and happy one.

How *can* women marry as they do?

Those that do it for a livelihood I can understand—and pity—but I do not call it “marriage.” After all, woman's place in the earning world is a cold and bare one. And there are women who marry out of curiosity. Others because the single life is not to their temperament, and others because the maternal instinct is strong; they are happy in their children—these last—and put up with the man. Some marry for the status they are incapable of obtaining otherwise, others for another hundred reasons, but where is the woman who marries for the only one that counts?

I wonder is there one in a million who, given

a free choice (which they seldom are in Great Britain, where caricatures pass as valuable men), would have married her husband because he is the one man in the world for her?

It's the only reason good enough for me, and I'm fool enough to swear it shall be mine.

Yet why should I ask this? Why cannot I be contented with a little bit of dry loaf, like my fellows? Oh, how oddly contented they are, the majority of these suet-pudding women in villages and suburbs, with their deadly, and usually impossible, husbands; servants who are always leaving, houses often smelling of food, and children that everybody else sees are the acme of commonplace.

Still, what is the third best for one represents the highest ideal and ambition of another; it's merely a matter of capacity—limited or otherwise. While I turn empty away, another revels in an earthly paradise. It's all a question of degree, and—oh, Jane! I am digressing horribly!

I will be serious no longer.

To continue with the house-party, which is so often going and coming it's quite confusing—well, there's Lady Charlton and Major Bourne. She's a lady with a lurid past and

many presents. She's very handsome. I think she and Major Bourne—whom I don't like—are a little bored already, and both would like to change. I suspect him of admiring yours truly; she fancies Captain Lascelles as cavalier, but he pretends not to see, being more or less of a Galahad—or else very hard to please. (One never knows whether it's virtue or fastidiousness.) Mr. and Mrs. Morris are not specially interesting—mill people. She dislikes me and doesn't mind showing it, as I'm nobody. She implied I was fast, and that was why Sir Peter had me asked. She said he'd pick out of the gutter if the face was pretty enough.

And I asked her was Oldham as bad as all that. (She comes from there.) She's very common and so jealous because I'm so much in the foreground, and she's almost out of the landscape.

Sir Peter said, "Damn it all! when one asks that class of person one has done more than enough; it ain't necessary to be civil to 'em." And he *isn't*.

Mrs. Morris is short and stout and suffers agony in tight stays, which are always "giving"—this "slim" rage is a tragedy for her—she is

ready to lick a titled boot any hour of the day. The other evening we were discussing people's ideas of heaven, and Sir Peter said his were the same as Mohammedans—a place with beautiful houris, and nice things to eat always ready. Lady Malden said a world where there was no sin, and Sir Peter nudged me to look at old Tommy, and whispered: “and no compromising noses.”

And old Tommy said no gout and twenty years younger, and looked at me.

And Miss Trevor said a place where there were plenty of husbands to go round, and one's mother did not get them all, and everybody roared. You see, it's nearly certain about the apostle. Sir Peter says she buries her husbands on a contract job. Jenny is really good-looking, but doesn't know how to make the best of herself, and thinking of her poverty and her mother, men fight shy, and she's given up hope.

She makes a joke of it to prevent other people doing so, but she'd make an ideal wife—only men are so blind. I wish I could hand over a few men I know.

Lady Trevor said apropos of heaven, a place where it was always moonlight. I sup-

pose she meant her complexion and a proposal-by-a-gurgling-stream sort of thing; she goes in for being very romantic, which makes it worse for Jenny.

And Sir Peter whispered—*not* very low—“and free funerals for husbands.”

Mr. Morris wouldn't say, but we all knew any place where there weren't any of us, only people who spoke with a Lancashire accent and left out the “h's” Mrs. Morris is so *awfully* careful about.

Mrs. Morris tried to change the subject, but said disagreeably: “Perhaps Miss Maunsell will tell us hers. But shall I guess? A Circe who never lacks . . . admirers.”

Wasn't that spiteful? For of course she meant swine. But I gave it back with lower spite, for I stood up and put my hands round my waist till it was squeezed in ever so, and said:

“Oh, no! Getting my stays off at night, and marrying into a county family.”

Wasn't it too horrid and vulgar of me? Of course they all giggled, and Mrs. Morris got purple and tried to look as if her stays didn't hurt her, and she had a daughter growing up taking seven in boots, whom she's hoping to get

into a hard-up family mentioned in the Stud Book.

Colonel Wylde declared for "No trumps and no women," and people thought he was trying to make a sort of pun and laughed again, and poor Mrs. Morris grew mottled trying to hide she was shocked. How shocked I should have been myself at it all if I were not an utter pagan with no religion, and only a blind idea of everything working out to an ultimate good, and clergymen and things being an awful bore!

Captain Lascelles said a thundering charge, the English to win, and his regiment to come out O. K.

He's a "lady novelist" hero, which, I'm afraid, has prejudiced me rather against him. He's over six feet in height, broad and very muscular, with a brown face and clear, grey eyes. In fact, "*a strong man from the North, light-locked, with eyes of dangerous grey*" is IT!

Unfortunately, he's by way of being masterful and pushing, and would take things for granted, if one let him. Even I have difficulty in keeping him in his place; so you can fancy! He's horribly high moral tone, too—

never overdraws. But I dare say it's all a matter of obstinacy rather than self-restraint and principle. He's badly off for the regiment he's in, but if a certain hearty gentleman and his two sons were to die all-in-a-minute he'd be a duke! Or if another gentleman and his son and *his* sons were also to come to an untimely end he'd be a double duke.

So likely, isn't it?

Of course if he was a duke I should begin instant-minute to treat him with respect, instead of—well, as I *do* treat them, you know. Oh, only-Jane! imagine my dismay when I found no duke, not even an earl, belted or otherwise—whatever the difference may be. In fact, there are no Matrimonial Prospects, so it's a good thing I came on pleasure rather than business.

Talking about pleasure and business reminds me that the other day Sir Peter caught hold of me in the corridor and jumped up and kissed my chin.

And I said very severely:

"Sir Peter, what business had you to kiss me?"

And he said plaintively: "Oh, my dear, don't

call it *business*—it's a pleasure!" so that I laughed instead of being angry.

That's the worst of him. I wish he wouldn't disarm you so, because really he is a very wicked old man, and I keep hearing dreadful tales. They say he's spoiled many women's lives. Isn't it horrible and cruel? He's so cunning and amusing, people think of him more as a sprite than a spider, and the flies run into the trap. Then he laughs and throws them away—and they never fly any more! By rights he ought to be scrunched under a great heavy boot as one scrunches a beetle. Miss Morris ought to be a champion at beetle-squashing!

There's a Mr. Hurlinghame here who is considered an awfully good catch. I believe he would let me catch him, too, but I can only think how dreadful it is he can find so many to sell themselves to him. He's not a nice man, and I don't think it's only money that has spoiled him. I believe he's been brought up entirely under feminine influences, and that is usually ruin. Anyway, I can't bear him.

He owns heaps of coal mines, and doesn't care tuppence for all the lives in his power, and the other day when there was that frightful

explosion he only thought of the money he'd lose. He will be a brute to his wife, and yet there's the greatest competition, and some penniless girl will place her life in his keeping.

Truly poverty makes us acquainted with strange . . . husbands.

Yet who am I to hold my head so high? In what am I better than the rest? I too would qualify, make conditions, for I should say to the man I loved madly, as I *will* love, Jane: "I don't care what you say, O man of great courage; verily I will go to hell for you should you so desire it—but not to the provinces."

Oh, dear! where's the house-party got to?

Well, there's Sir George Pallister, a "partly-married man." He and his wife spend Lent together, but never meet otherwise unless owing to the tactlessness of hostesses. (Fortunately they are in different sets.) He's a perfect little love of a man, just like a cupid—only, of *course*, dressed differently.

Mrs. Bretelle came down the same day, of *course*; it's been going on for years; they go everywhere together, and it's quite as dull, and much more respectable than matrimony.

She obeys him in the most charming early Victorian fashion—but then he shot her hus-

band by accident, and she's been under an obligation to him ever since.

Sir Peter says her husband was a horrible man, more like a gorilla than anything, and that when he was married, the giver-out of the hymn lost his head, and gave out "*Great God! what do I see and hear?*" when Mr. Bretelle came up the aisle, instead of "*O perfect love!*" but I expect Sir Peter has added on to the story.

Sir George's name is Cupid, and nearly everybody calls him by it, and is awfully fond of him. I assure you he's just a duck. So lovable! He said *his* idea of Paradise was "no Lent," and you can guess how we all howled.

Thank goodness we escaped his brother, the bishop, who Lady Malden had asked, but who Sir Peter wired off by telling some story. He says the bishop is simply awful in his own house, and not at all pleasant in other people's, but quite tolerable in the pulpit—for people who don't go to church.

Sir George picked my bridge-purse the other night of all it held. He said "England expects every man to do—his neighbour," and dropped all the money down my back. When it rolled on the floor he said he was glad I

didn't tight-lace, for it spoiled a pretty figure and worsened a bad one, and—but oh, goodness, my only-Jane! I must snatch some beauty sleep and finish this to-morrow.

CHAPTER VI

Now, Jane, I must finish off quickly, for your letter is assuming the proportions of a manuscript.

To-night we played Resolutions. It was my idea; do you know, nearly everything is.

I suggested we should pretend it was New Year's Day and make resolutions for each other.

I made up for Sir Peter that he must henceforth behave with the dignity expected of one of his age and position; and he for me that I must not look in the glass more than *necessary*; and they said he had won! Wasn't it a shame?

Of course, I know I always do look in every glass. I can't help it. I take my own breath away sometimes—how I should fall in love with myself if I were a man!

Sir Peter whispered to me he didn't like to say the one he had made up for the D. D., and I *begged* him not to, but of course he would, and he said:

"Not to call any more Peters after me," which was very silly and rather dreadful, and I'll not explain it.

Of course Lady Trevor's was to remain a widow, and Colonel Wylde's to play no more bridge and make love to at least three women and marry one. And Captain Lascelles to get into debt and come down off the heights—which served him right, I thought. I hate high-moral-toney young men. Cupid's was, of course, to extend Lent, and there were crowds of others I have forgotten. It was very silly and rather personal, but we all laughed—at each other. It was an idiotic game, and I ought to be ashamed of myself. Perhaps I am, a tiny bit. There is nothing funny, Jane o' me, about the resolutions we make—and break. I'm sure there must be enough paving-stone for a hundred hells.

Is it best to make—and break—or never make at all?

It shows you realise you own limitations when you make them, but the breaking thereof shows such weak-mindedness. Still, perhaps it's a sort of feeble reaching out for better things, a kind of being good by proxy, or on the cheap.

It costs nothing, and we've had a moment of spurious virtue, which is better than no virtue at all.

Resolutions are like still-born babies: they have been born, but not to life, only to nothingness; and they lie in nameless graves.

Yet the world will go on making them just the same. Of such stuff are dreams and ambitions, too. Some to fructify, some to lie in the barren, shallow graves of the Never-Never Land till the last trump rings out, and the sea gives up her dead.

And oh, Jane! what a long, abortive troop of dead hopes, ambitions, resolutions our graves will give up! How much easier to meet the eyes of God than of those whom we have denied the life they craved! We will be weighed in our *own* balances and found wanting, and the verdict of God will matter less.

Forgive me, Jane, for being serious; you are the only one to see my other "soul side"; it's a merry imp I keep to "front the world with." So I will hie me back to the Hall and Malden things.

Who did I get to? The Christian-looking young man with the nose? Not that he's as Christian as he looks, fortunately, though he *is*

the sort of young man whose sisters would play the harmonium. Miss Burney thinks it a pity he isn't married.

Miss B. is the professional wife type, so willing and obliging, honest and respectable—till she's got him.

Which she hasn't yet! And I don't think, myself, will. After all, one doesn't marry a servant, and that's what she is, to all intents and purposes.

There's a Sir Thomas Larchmonte here I'm awfully sorry about. I'll tell you why.

One night I wore that new dress which is neither cream nor flesh coloured, but both and either and neither, and I stared and stared at myself, for never had I looked so beautiful. My topaz eyes were just like stars, and my dull-red hair rippled and rippled ever so high; and then my red, curved mouth, my dimple, my white, pink-flushed skin! Oh, it was a picture, indeed, and really, Jane, I'd have admired it just as much if it hadn't been me—perhaps more!

They call me the Golden Girl here, because of my golden eyes.

I'm glad I'm not thin; thin women lack half a woman's charm. But I am round, though

ever so slim and tall and stately. I must be wondrous fair, for I cannot find a thing I would have changed.

How eloquent I become on the subject of my own beauty!

Well, I need not tell you I did not keep the resolution Sir Peter made for me, for I gazed and gazed, and the gong went . . .

Then I rushed, and just at the dim end of the corridor I collided into something. I was full in the light, but the "collided" was in shadow, and I said:

"What's that?"

After a moment's pause and drawing of breath, such a bitter voice answered: "God made it. Therefore let it pass for a man." (Do you know where the quotation comes from? I have forgotten.)

Then the owner of the voice stepped into the light, and somehow I could find nothing to say, for oh, Janel it was such a miserable little apology of a man, almost a dwarf, and thin and weak and sickly. And it was Sir Thomas Larchmonte, the great *parti*!

"Beauty and the worm," he said, sneering. "Why don't you tread on me, gracious lady, and put an end to my miserable existence?"

He scarcely reached up to my shoulder, and for the first time in my life I was sorry I was beautiful, for it made it worse for him; and his eyes—there was hell in his little, weak eyes, though fools would have said it was whisky, because the lids were slightly reddened.

"You—you will be late for dinner," was all I could think of to say, "and I'm so sorry I nearly knocked you down."

I wished I hadn't said that; it was so terribly tactless.

"But you could have picked me up again quite easily, O daughter of the gods," he said, "and put me on my little feet and wiped my little nose."

"Who are you?" was all I could say.

"Sir Thomas Larchmonte. I notice you don't say *what* are you? That's unnecessary, isn't it? I'm four-feet-nine in my boots—with my heels made as high as I dare—health is not in me, and I'm keeping a stalwart brother out of an excellent inheritance. Dear me, fair unknown, why do you look at me with such understanding golden eyes and make me say all this?"

"Say whatever you like," I said. "People usually do to me."

"I apologise for the Almighty's blunder by being as useful as possible," he said; "so if there's anything I can do for you, kindly name it. As a third I am considered quite artistic."

Poor Sir Thomas! *his* idea of heaven would be a body to match his soul, for I believe he is big and bold and brave *inside*. Alas! that insides count so little, Jane o' me! Now, though nobody guesses it, I've got quite a nice little inside carefully wrapped away in tissue-paper. I show a little of it to you, and all of it is ready for the Best Beloved, who, of course, won't care in the least as long as the exterior is all right.

All sorts of foolish ideals are there, and exploded romantic notions that no one who wants to get on should encourage, but such parcels belong to the dowdy woman, and I conceal mine and spend my time being "brilliant." And all the time I am being so terribly brilliant, I should like to be something quite different instead.

Poor Sir Thomas is morbid and bitter, and afraid lest he should be tempted to "buy" some woman; he determines to die unmarried rather than have anything less than love, and how can love be for him? He knows it cannot. He is

afraid he will fall in love with me, and avoids me now.

Do you know I'd die rather than own it to anyone else, but I've always believed in love at first sight, and that I should know him at once, and love him for aye and beyond.

But would he love me even for this short earthly journey?

Ah, no! Once I was his, he would tire, and my beauty would be a valueless thing because he owned it, my soul something that mattered not at all. Probably he would seek pastures new, such being the nature of the polygamous sex, and I would seek *her* with a dagger and a poisoned bowl, for I am very primitive—*moi!*

Oh, if there might be just one true mate for me! Because, you see, you can't unlove, and I should care so much, and it would hurt; and where would be my indomitable pride with my neck under a man's foot? Why isn't the world made different? Why must half humanity starve physically, and the physically fed starve spiritually? What a grand old muddle is the world!

Yet because I am fascinating and a fool, I dare to think I might keep even that strange being, a husband, in love with me all my life!

What do *you* think? The truth pleases. In fact, be—ugh!—frank! And I would have four stalwart sons like the myth, and one fair daughter like myself to remind him of the days of our youth. And I suppose he would say hang it!—and worse—and what an infernal expense children were, and God knows what we're to do with four great, hulking boys, and Eton is out of the question. . . . Such is life; like a fascinating woman; a spark, a flash, a dazzle, and then—the light gone out! And just dust amidst dust at the last! All our dreams crumble sooner or later, friend of my heart; then comes the last state, which is worse than the first, when no more dreams come, and *we do not care!* And with other dumb driven cattle we eat and sleep and return to the earth from whence we came, our souls to the God who gave them. Poor little souls! Does He recognise them, I wonder? How dirty and ugly and shrinking some of them have become! I could die of that thought at times—if I did not laugh instead. The tears smart behind the lids of my tiger eyes—as Lady Trevor calls them. Shall I go back to a tiger again?

Oh, Jane, if it should be behind iron bars!

I have seen the agony in the eyes of the beasts civilisation has taken captive to make a show for men, the dull, dumb aching for liberty, without which life is hell.

Losing all, they gain but this—food without the hunt and the killing, meat without savour. If I had my will such traffic would cease at once; the beasts might be shot, but never trapped or caged. I have lain awake with their eyes sending me mad.

So it is to the forest I will go when I become a tiger again and seek my meat from God (unless I am very wicked and must go to hell, as those others have done), and my coat shall be finer than all the other lady tigers, my eyes more golden, and I will choose my mate from the most magnificent of them all; and I will have four little he-cubs and one little she-cub!

My husband will be terrible and fierce to others, but tender and true to me; and my master and my god. So in the end all things will work together for good.

And Sir Peter will be the lowest form of vermin (forgive me, Jane), and his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him, and he will be continually being cracked with a finger-nail—ugh!

Are you quite sure you are looking well after Bub? What is the latest naughty thing he has done? Oh, I hope he has been naughty or he must be going to die. (Are there any more illegitimate puppies in the flat and Bub getting suspected?)

He has assured me it was all a mistake, and that, anyway, they are *really* very little ones. And you might understand from the way he flies from them they are none of his. Does he still whine o' nights for me? Do I like him extra much because he is so badly brought up, so humanely selfish and disobedient? But I am his little world, all the same, for he never even calls on his latest wife, and sneered at her family.

"How like a woman," he sniffed, "to have such hideous babies; and such a lot of them!"

I wonder how animals regard us humans? As we God, I suppose. As He to us, so we to them—a god or a devil! We hold the keys of life and death, fate and hell. We are great because we are strong. We have them at our mercy; to beat, starve or torture (and some called men do these things), or we can lead into the fields of rapture. We give or withhold an earthly ambition—a bone. We do not

want it ourself, yet nevertheless do we withhold. Oh, what a selfish deity! Yet often it is for their own good.

Is that how it is with God and us, and is it not wanton cruelty after all?

Oh, Jane, that I might hold the keys of life and fate of one poor human destiny called Prue!

Then your dazzled eyes would behold me ascend to the far heights in a flame of glory. I would be a great orator and speak with the tongues of men or of angels; or a great author with a pen like a two-edged sword; and where my father had chastised with whips, yea would I chastise with scorpions. Or the daughter of Herodias, who danced before a king, but freedom for those mourning in captivity would be the guerdon I craved. Or I would be a perfect wife and mother, and while the pit of hell seethed round, I and my loved ones would be safe within that haven we had won by right of love divine; so should I be greater than kings or courtiers, and there would be peace within *my* palaces, and plenteousness within my gates!

Now, lest I should be serious a little longer, I will tell you something which may make you laugh—even though you are rather a solemn



Jane. "Things is curioser and curioser," as Alice says, and I think the rabbit-hutch is the curiosest.

When I am married I am going to have one curiosest.

The other afternoon when we were all in the drawing-room, a sound of one-hoss-shay wheels was heard on the gravel, and Sir Peter called out to Colonel Wylde, who was talking to Jenny Trevor in the window: "Are they rabbit-hutch people?"

And Colonel Wylde hung out of the window and said they were. He said he thought it looked like a vicar's wife requiring flannel petticoats or subscriptions, and everybody got up in a hurry except the D. D., who *will* have people shown into the drawing-room instead of anywhere else, and the door opens right on to people crossing the hall so you can't escape. At least, I thought you couldn't, but Sir Peter is equal to anything, for when I looked puzzled he pointed to a sort of carved cupboard in a far, dim corner, and said:

"That's the rabbit hutch."

"But I don't see any rabbits," I said, going and looking.

"Well, you see one now," he said, and

dropped on his hands and knees, and crawled into the cupboard and vanished.

I was simply thunderstruck.

Then he shouted to me to follow, and the others behind told me to be quick, and I crawled into the cupboard too, and in a few moments could stand upright in a tiny secret chamber; then came another hutch leading into the passage.

So we escaped.

Sir Peter had found it out by chance, and had put it in order, and uses it when visitors aren't wanted.

I believe Lady Malden enjoyed herself with the vicar's wife, who is getting up a Zenana, *gynae* or something of the harem order, assisted by the vicar. Lady Malden is to open it and be patroness—the light of the harem, in fact. Sir Peter isn't going.

The watchword for the hutch is "rabbits," and everybody falls to his knees behind each other and pushes to get out quickly, because the last one is sometimes placed in rather an awkward position. It isn't good for clothes, though. Last time she stayed here, the Duchess of Hightower, who is ever so dignified and cold and stately, having been a favourite of

the chorus, used it to avoid the dow's work-party, but the duke is so fat he got stuck, and they couldn't push him backwards or forwards and didn't know what to do because the door was opening and people were coming in, and the duchess said: "Never mind, it's just like Jimmy; leave him as he is." And they had to, partly shutting the hutch-door and putting a chair against it, so that nothing was noticed, and the poor duke had to listen about cutting out garments and things, and gussets and seams, and afterwards two old maids near him began to talk about such dreadful things he nearly died of blushing. He was awfully red in the face when they finally unwedged him, and he said it was all the old maids, and that he was very sorry, but he was afraid he was going to have a fit, or something; but Sir Peter opened his last bin of extra-special, priceless port, and the duke got all right, and the duchess said that was Jimmy all over. It isn't as if the hutch is really so small, for yesterday when the Zenana man called about the harem, Sir Peter and I somehow got in together. It was a tight fit, but Sir Peter, who had squeezed in at the same time, said he didn't mind.

He said: "I like being jammed when the

jammer is the right one," and grinned meaningly. "But God forbid me and the Trevor should keep house!"

Captain Lascelles, who was crawling behind, caught hold of my foot, and cried hold on and not to be in such a hurry, but wait for him; and the heel scraped his chin, and he seemed rather humpy for a bit, especially when people asked him if his man had cut him shaving.

Sir Peter looked round at him and put out his tongue and said, "Did it have to go without its little jam, then!" in his idiotic way. I do think he might be more dignified; officially he's dignified to death. You should see him at shows and things.

If Toby calls, give him my love, and say I hope he has left St. John's Wood and returned to more sylvan glades and paths of virtue. Tell him to be good and he will continue as solicitor to the best families. Tell him the course of illicit love never did run cheap. Tell him middle-aged young men with two thousand (£2000) a year are under the protection of the gods, and need not seek to protect goddesses. Tell him I could not love him near so much loved I not others more. And tell him any other lie you can think of. You might

remind him that when I marry I shall insist on having the first word, also the last, and any that come in between.

He may like to know.

I was awfully surprised to find that Lady Charlton was *the* Lady Charlton of that notorious case. Everybody knew Lord Charlton should have got his divorce easily, and I suppose some day he will. Meanwhile, both go their separate ways. She is obviously tired of Major Bourne and keen on Captain Lascelles. Sir Peter tries to throw the latter with her as much as possible. He calls it "match-breaking." He says it's a foregone conclusion, and that Josephs are fools.

Did I mention Captain Lascelles was distinctly good-looking, and very big and strong? He has such a brown face, and awfully piercing grey eyes. Some people think they see too far.

He has a most uncomfortable habit of looking through you to the real you. No wonder he isn't awfully popular here. He has a straight nose, a very firm, well-shaped mouth and chin—a bit too dogged, perhaps. I suspect him of obstinacy. Undoubtedly he's horribly "lady-novelisty." The heroine would

fall in love with him at once. I think I shall try and make a match between him and Jenny Trevor—it would be so perfectly unsuitable!—and try and like Sir Thomas for his beautiful soul (though its beauty is warped like the body; but it would bloom afresh in the waters of love and happiness).

Sir Peter would like me to wear the red flower of a double and doubtful life, but I pretend not to understand. Yet he frightens me just a little now and then—when he drops his amusing mask.

The other day he said: “So your price is above rubies, my dear.” (He had wanted to give me some.) “If I were free to bestow upon you all that I had, what then?”

We were standing by the lake, and Lady Malden was a little distance off, poised over the edge feeding the swans. The slightest slip and she would have been in; the sides are awfully steep. I remember wishing she would be careful, for once in she could never get out. And I caught such an awful glance directed at her from Sir Peter with *murder* in it. He is capable of pushing her in. Then he'd probably make a joke of the affair to his second wife! He's more of a demon than a man.

I told him if he could make me a duchess it would make no difference, and he said: "Well, we shall see."

I wish he would realise I am in earnest, and not make it so hard for me to get rid of him. I know some of the people think . . .

Captain Lascelles is most objectionable about it sometimes, but as I told you, I have no intention of standing any nonsense from that high and mighty personage.

Let him keep to his Lady Charltons.

Several times he has made such efforts to keep Sir Peter and me apart that I have encouraged Sir Peter just to show him! He doesn't always laugh when I say smart, doubtful things, either, but looks at me in such a puzzled way it drives me nearly frantic. In fact, I am in danger of disliking the young man.

I don't regret the severe snub I gave him the other day, though he was awfully cold and dignified, and no doubt thought *he* had got the best of it. I agree with Sir Peter—he *is* a prig. I hinted so to him, and he shrugged his shoulders in a lordly way, and looked at Sir Peter, and said:

"Thank you, Miss Maunsell."

And I said: "You superior people always come the biggest croppers in the end."

Then he got heated and said he wasn't superior. But I don't regret making him angry. In fact, I regret little—*moi!*

I often wonder what we *shall* regret when we are old and cold and grey and the pageant has passed—for us. We can only watch the boys and girls taking their places in the ranks we've been obliged to fall out of, some of them gallantly, many of them helplessly, not because they would, but because they must.

Will it be our sins?

Somehow I seldom think that; I feel we shall forget more than we shall regret. The kind word and deed, still-born? The one whose life it might have brightened long since lying with his feet to the East. Perhaps. The opportunities we see for what they are—too late? Surely those we must regret, for we might have changed our whole lives in time if we had not been blind and foolish.

I think it will be the lost happiness we will grudge the longest and deepest. For, looking back, happiness seems so little in our lives. We like to count up our joys, to linger over them,

treasure them, tell the beads one by one, lovingly, regretfully, slowly—and oh! what a short, sad rosary, after all!

And what will it be like to live in the past instead of the future? When there is nothing more to come, and only death awaits us, with its flaming sword barring out the light of day.

There are three ages; not seven: youth, who lives in the future—always the golden day to come; middle age with the gold drab, living in the present, making the best of what is and must be; old age, looking back, ever back, the golden day grey now and oh, so far away!

For the gold is in us; it comes from within, not without, and colours everything for youth, dies in middle age, is only a dim memory when the sands of life pass swiftly.

And I said I would be serious no longer!

Good-bye, Jane! quickly ere I offend again, for the sun dies down in dreams of rest, and at such times the hidden voice speaks.

Love to Beelezebub, and tell him mind no more “little mistakes,” for I cannot look the angry owners of the harem in the face. They say I have brought him up so very badly. But really it is he who brought me up, if *only* they would understand.

The illegitimate are always superfluous, somehow.

Still, I think it was perfectly beastly and wicked and cruel to drown *all* the poor, wee babies! How would Mrs. Chandler have liked it if someone had drowned hers? And they must have been so much more hideous than my dear Bub's.

But don't tell her I said so.

PRUE.

CHAPTER VII

PRUE leant back with a sigh of relief and stretched her cramped fingers; she licked the ink off one of them, and then made a face of disgust.

"Well, Jane can't say I've neglected her," she thought complacently, as she began to roll up the sheets of her long letter. At last the untidy parcel, looking like the manuscript of an aspiring author, was done up and addressed.

She took it down into the hall to put in the box, and found the men of the party just in from shooting.

"Ha!" exclaimed Sir Peter, with the gestures of the melodramatic villain. "What is that I see before me? A work of genius!"

He twitched the parcel suddenly out of the girl's hand, running up the stairs with it, and grinned down at her like an impish schoolboy.

"Now you shall tell us all about your novel," he shrieked. "Little did I think I was enter-

taining authoresses unawares. I shouldn't have asked you if I'd known. ' 'Orrible revelations,' of course. Who is the villain and who is the hero? Unless you've made me the hero, the work shall never see the light of publication——"

"It's a letter," cried Prue. "I can't authorise—I wish I could. I could do with some extra money, and it would be rather fun to be a celebrity. Please give it me back."

"Not till you can think of a better story," gibed Sir Peter. "As if one writes sheets and sheets of sermon paper to a friend——"

"Perhaps it's a love-letter," said Major Bourne, pulling his handsome moustache.

"Do you think I'd waste all that on a *man*!" exclaimed Prue contemptuously.

"Well, he *might* read it—in instalments, you know," chimed in Sir George Pallister. "It's as good as a novel, for I dare say we are all down there in one guise or the other. Now confess!"

"You are, every one of you," she owned boldly; "and only your own consciences can tell you in what form."

"Sha'n't give it up till you tell us ourselves,"

called out Sir Peter. "May I look at the address?"

"Certainly; it's addressed to Miss Jane Thompson, my own truly friend."

"A Jane!"

"My only-Jane, who is a dear."

"Who is the hero? You've got to tell us that."

"If you've made me the villain because my hair and eyes are black, and I'm sardonically handsome," Major Bourne plaintively observed, "I shall treat you henceforth with icy respect."

"Oh, you're only a super—a sort of walking-on gentleman; pound a week, and find your own clothes," explained Prue sweetly.

"The deuce I am!" returned Major Bourne, who was quite a professional lady-killer, a frown in his sleepy, black eyes. "Don't I even say a little piece?"

"You haven't a speaking-part; you've just got to pretend to be a gentleman—on the stage!"

Major Bourne did not answer, being busy repeating Prue's ambiguous sentence to himself to see if there was really anything rude meant. He was quite certain he was a gentle-

man, because his father and grandfather had been so before him, and nothing else mattered.

"What am I?" asked Sir Thomas Larchmonte in his thin, harsh tones. "Something too trifling to count, I suppose. Perhaps I play the part of the jumping frog—in the wings?"

She smiled at the distorted little creature very kindly. "You have ever so much to say," she returned, "and the hero fears you."

"I'm afraid you haven't been very lucky in your hero," he sneered. "And I thought the heroes of lady novelists were tall and mighty and feared nothing—like Lascelles, for instance."

"Oh, Captain Lascelles isn't the hero," said Prue, laughing. "He isn't in it at all."

"A pretty fool I should look as a hero!" growled Lascelles resentfully.

"Imagine calling *yourself* pretty!" cried Prue softly.

"I am the hero!" cried Sir George, puffing out his chest. "Let no man deny it. Don't people call me Cupid, and haven't I blue eyes and golden hair and a real ducky profile?"

"Of course he's the hero," agreed Prue. "Look at his dear, little nose!"

"Then I insist upon knowing the name of

the villain," declared Sir Peter, coming cautiously down the stairs. "Listen, Miss Prue, tell me the name of the scoundrel you've said cruel things about, and I will post your love-letter and lick the stamps—for of course Jane Thompson is a man."

"You can think that if you like," she answered indifferently, her black lashes veiling the golden eyes. "As for the villain, there isn't one—it takes brains to be a villain——"

And with a light laugh she fled before the rage of five insulted men.


At the top of the stairs Jim Lascelles' long legs caught her up.

"I say," he burst out, "you aren't angry, are you? There's just an hour before we change for dinner; you might let me give you a lesson in billiards. You said something about wanting to learn."

Prue, who was an expert at the game, stared; then she saw he was really labouring under a mistake, and her dimple shone out.

"Are you sure it won't be too much trouble?" she asked demurely.

"To teach you? There is nothing I'd enjoy more! I should like to teach you other things than billiards, Miss Maunsell."



He moved closer, his keen, grey eyes swiftly passionate.

"Do you mean 'snooker'?" she enquired innocently. "I believe you can make quite a good thing out of it once you become proficient. I'm three-quarters behindhand, you'll be shocked to hear. People say you're too obstinate to overdraw."

"No doubt it's more obstinacy than virtue," he owned with a grin; "but I didn't mean snooker, Miss Maunsell."

"Then I'll get Sir Peter to teach me snooker," she said cheerfully. "So that will be all right."

He hardly looked as if he thought so.

"Now, this," he explained, bending rather closely over her and putting words into effect, "is a cannon."

Prue rolled her great eyes. "Is it called after the shooting one or the church thing?"

"It's spelt the non-clerical way."

"That's fortunate. I shouldn't get to like the game if it was too churchy."

"If you pocket a ball it counts——"

"But you know *no* woman who respects herself has pockets," she cried, shocked; "and, be-

sides, the other person would be sure to see. The ball's so huge! Is that why so few women excel at the game?"

Jim looked doubtful for a minute; such ignorance was rather suspicious; but then her face—she was innocence personified. He explained his meaning, grinning broadly.

"Oh, dear!" said the girl, "how silly you must think me!"

"I wish I might tell you what I *do* think," he said breathlessly, laying down his cue and moving quickly towards her.

She stepped back, putting her hands quickly over her ears.

"Oh, don't!" she implored piteously. "I had a peppery Indian colonel for relative, and I never could get accustomed to his language—except damn—and there's a big D on the table all ready—couldn't you just point to that?"

Jim was too much in love to be anything but idiotic. "You're laughing at me," he said unhappily.

"That's what Sir Peter is always saying."

Lascelles' face darkened, and he crashed two balls together viciously.

"Isn't he amusing?" she went on. "So—so unconventional!"

He flung the balls to the other end of the table, and one went off.

He picked it up with evil language in his heart.

"What's that called . . . in billiards?"

He flushed, stammering something incoherent.

He proceeded with the lesson, finding Prue by no means sharp as a learner. In fact, if it had been anyone else he would have thought her uncommonly stupid; as it was, he was pleased.

She would need a great number of lessons.

He explained everything necessary; he also held her cue most of the time and her fingers as often as he could.

But for her frequent references to Sir Peter, whom it was evident she admired greatly, the lesson would have been delightful.

As they were both leaning over the table, Major Bourne came in.

"Hullo!" he said. "I came to see if anyone wanted a game, but I see Miss Maunsell is giving you a lesson. I'm sorry for you! She beat Pallister the other day all ends up, and you know what *he* is! I suppose you've about met your Waterloo."

"I think that's about the size of it," the young man replied very grimly, after a short pause.

The door closed behind Major Bourne.

"So you've been making a fool of me?" observed Jim resentfully.

She took her cue out of his hands and began making brilliant shots.

"Far be it from me to usurp the prerogative of nature," she retorted.

"I had no right to take it for granted——"

"Never take anything for granted where I am concerned," she broke in a little meaningly.

"How disagreeable you look! Now, Sir Peter is never out of temper—his sense of humour rises triumphant throughout."

"*Bother Sir Peter!*" he burst out, hating the inadequate word.

"Oh, point to D!" she cried.

His hands shook as he gripped the table; he loved the girl beyond rhyme or reason, but she drove him well-nigh mad at times.

"Are you never serious?" he demanded.

"I couldn't be if I tried."

"I don't believe you. You have feelings, deep feelings, a brain and a heart, too. You're not a doll-woman, a pretty fool——"

"I object to being called pretty!" she interrupted hotly. "Every second girl you see is pretty—through art or nature; but I—I am beautiful, and that is different."

He looked at her ruefully. So the idol was vain! He had expected it before; still, she was none the less an idol. "You are the loveliest woman the world has ever seen!" he cried positively.

"Oh, I like to hear that. Sir Peter says so too."

"To hell with Sir Peter!" flashed from him; then he apologised abjectly.

She turned away with a shrug.

"Look here, Prue," he began desperately. "I can't stand——"

"Then why not sit down?" she enquired.

"I can't bear this. From the moment I saw you coming across the hall, it was all up with me. I knew you for the only one, the one I've waited for. I've never given a thought to another woman. My life is all for you, dear, if you would take it some day. I love you so! I can't help it!"

"Oh! . . . Do you want to?" she enquired carelessly.

"Oh, Prue!" and he advanced towards her.

She seized her cue, skillfully warding him off, conscious to the full of the absurd spectacle they presented.

"Go away!" she said, and there was something almost panic-stricken in her voice.

"Never! I shall ask you a thousand times till——"

"That's what they all say"—pettishly—"and I'm sick of it! I loathe proposals. I've had so many, and they all do it in the same silly way—never anything original. They started at sixteen, ten years ago, and I suppose they'll go on for the next ten years."

"Not if you marry me, darling. I won't let them."

"I don't want to marry," she returned crossly. "I want a friend. Oh, go away, can't you?"

"I won't tease you any more now, but I'll have you in the end, Prue. Is there nothing to soften you?"

"Oh, well, if you'll blow up your cousin and his two sons, and offer me the strawberry leaves, I might think of it," she retorted, moving to the door; "but I'm not going to live on love—so there! On your love, that is, for I don't like you in that way at all."

"You'd accept me if I was a duke? It's a lie, Prue, and you know it. Thank God! you're not like that! You can hide your true self from others, but not from me—not from me, Prue!"

"I forbid you to call me Prue, sir!"

"Very well, Miss Maunsell. To myself I can still call you what I please, and I do—wife for one thing——"

"Go away!" she said again.

She was angry with herself; she had managed other proposals better. Never before had she felt in the least at a disadvantage.

"I shall go on trying, and I'll have you in the end——"

"They all say that," she drawled mockingly. "It strikes me I shall be an awfully married woman."

"We're going to be true mates and comrades all our lives. Different to everybody else."

"How can you be so silly? Nobody is different; they only think they are. Besides, I am determined to marry a duke. I want to be 'the most beautiful duchess.' Why not? Sir Peter says——"

Jim's face whitened suddenly. "That . . . viper!" he exclaimed between set teeth. "Lis-

ten to me—you must beware of him—do you hear? You are not safe——”

“Rubbish! Sir Peter and I understand each other.”

“In what way?” he demanded jealously.

“He is very fascinating——”

“*Fascinating!*” he echoed. “He’s just a heartless *roué!* He possesses some unholy power. I don’t understand it—I don’t want to understand it, but it makes women mad for him—utterly reckless. I’ve seen a nice, well-brought-up girl lose her head so that nothing mattered for love of him, for though he only gives counterfeit he receives the other. And you are reckless, Prue; you would fling everything aside for the man you loved, as that man flings the wretched fools——”

“What a lot you think you know of me!” she shrugged; “and what nonsense you talk! To your better understanding, sir!” and with a mocking bow she left him.

She reached her own room breathless as if from running, and pressed her hot face against the cool window-pane. “I knew he was pushing and impertinent,” she cried, stamping her foot, “and wanted keeping in his place!”

And she decided that he should so be kept.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH the exception of Lady Malden they were all in the drawing-room waiting for tea, and if the truth must be owned, very hot and not a little cross.

All told, for atmospheric reasons as well as others, it had been a day especially trying to the temper. The shooting under a sweltering sun, and with two new men who had proved dangerous to their companions, had been a fiasco, and the women had tired of bridge in a shady part of the garden, and been very sweet to each other with the sweetness that covers a multitude of hidden spite.

There had been a second meaning to nearly every speech, and even Prue, who was seldom cross, and always got the best of it, felt a trifle ruffled.

Everybody hoped that tea would mend matters.

It was cooler in the drawing-room than in

the hall, and it had been ordered there; of course, as always happens, it was a little late.

Sir George Pallister looked a very cross Cupid as he poured into Mrs. Bretelle's ear the misfortunes of the day.

Major Bourne edged near Prue, who had Sir Peter on her other side, and looked at Lady Charlton with scarcely-veiled boredom, while Lady Charlton smiled upon Jim Lascelles, who was pulling his moustache and deliberately turning away from her to gaze jealously upon the beauty.

Mrs. Morris was scarlet from the heat and tighter stays than usual, for the last pair, becoming almost bearable, warned her it was time to endure in a pair that hadn't "got out of shape." The wretched woman's life was a martyrdom of stays that "hadn't got out of shape." Her temper was vile, but she dare not show it, and even wished she was in her provincial home with husband and servants at her mercy.

Mr. Morris read the city page of the paper for the twentieth time, and wished "society" in a hotter place than it was. He was as unaware as Mrs. Morris that they weren't in society at all, but merely (and under protest at

that) in the house of a notorious "smart-setter," and that the only people possessing the *entrée* to Court and society were Sir Thomas Larchmonte, Colonel Wylde and Jim Lascelles, and that the women were considered quite *déclassé*. Still, they were in the "suburbs," so to speak, and ignorance was bliss in their case.

Lady Trevor was looking very golden as to wig, and the apostle contemplated her gloomily.

Miss Trevor and Colonel Wylde were in the far window, she listening with real sympathy to his grumbles and suppressed bad language on the events of the day.

Sir Thomas Larchmonte talked absently to Miss Burney, whose hopes ran high, but he cast many a stealthy glance at the back of Prue's dull-red head.

Old Tommy and Mr. Hurlinghame were whispering in a corner, and judging from the smothered bursts of laughter, it was as well none of the ladies were near.

Mrs. Tommy was helping Lady Malden in her "parish" room upstairs to sort out articles of strange shape to bestow upon the deserving poor, i.e., those who permitted their souls to

be pruned and trimmed by Lady Malden and the vicar.

"Tea is coming at last!" cried Lady Trevor thankfully.

Mrs. Morris sighed; tea would have been such a comfort had she dared indulge in it to any extent, but she tried to do without anything ticketed with the ominous words, "flesh-forming."

"So are two awful females on the doorstep!" gasped Sir Peter, rushing to the "hutch." "Rabbits, quick!"

"And leave tea!" wailed Lady Trevor. "Surely they won't come in here. What are they like?"

"The sort that tout for subscriptions," he groaned, "and are so awfully polite when you refuse 'em, that you call 'em back and give 'em more than they asked for—not that I shall give these women anything. They're too ugly."

"It's not subscriptions; it's upper-tooting," corrected Prue. "I know, because a school friend married into upper-tooting, and *all* her in-laws and things were just like that. They wore their clothes like a gentleman who isn't, a dress-suit—by their wearing thereof shall you

know them. She asked me what she should do about it, short of giving up the man, for she was the eldest of six girls, and twenty-nine, and lots of them had those things in their noses to do with the weather or temperature—adenoids——”

Someone murmured “adenoids.”

But Prue continued unheeding: “So of course it made it extra awkward. The red-faced one is married; the other isn’t, but hopes to be. She’s the sort that’s not only engaged to a curate, but quite pleased about it. I believe the single one, who is a prime mover in the affair—note her progressive nose—has invented some pretext to call to observe how ‘the other half’ lives. Perhaps she’ll write to the papers about it. She has certainly read strange tales of the ‘smart set,’ and expects the worst. I say, let’s have a joke, and instead of ‘rabbit-hutching’ give them a little more than they expect. It’ll appear in the paper afterwards as a true picture from life—‘by one who knows it intimately.’ Let’s——”

“But they are here; there’s no time to prepare anything,” objected Major Bourne.

“Leave it to me,” said Prue quickly. “Just follow my lead, that’s all.”

At that moment the ladies—who *were* from upper-tooting, as it happened—appeared; the elder nervously, the younger aggressively.

"I don't like forcing myself among the aristocracy," the married lady, Mrs. Thompson, had protested to her sister. "They're sure to be rude."

"Not to me," said Miss Smith majestically. "I am quite accustomed to mixing in society."

As a journalist on a third-rate paper, she reported on the dresses of fifth-rate suburban society, and had been entertained by a knight's wife, whom she spoke of as "my friend, the Lady Stevens."

"But it's such a poor excuse for calling——"

"Quite sufficient; besides, you forget my article upon 'the smart set from the inside.' I must get as much material as possible."

She was quite equal to the occasion, when, at her own request, she was shown at once into Sir Peter's presence. "How do you do?" she said in an affected manner, sailing forward, delighted to find that her finery was much "smarter" than any dress there. "I'm so glad you happened to be at home, for I have a letter I wished to give you personally."

She handed it with a bow learned at a cheap dancing-school.

"Quite so," said Sir Peter blandly, looking at Prue for guidance, while he read a long letter relating to a trespass on his grounds.

"We are staying in the neighbourhood for a few days, and thought it an excellent opportunity——"

"Quite so," he murmured again.

Miss Maunsell, whose beauty dazzled the visitors, took up a cup and saucer. "You will have some tea?" she said graciously to the journalist, who felt sure she was a duchess at least.

Tea was handed round, and Prue, who had slipped out of the room, returned with Sir George's cherished top-hat.

She placed it by her side, all affecting to notice nothing unusual, and sipped her tea critically.

"Beastly, as usual!" she exclaimed in wrath, and poured her cupful into Sir George's hat.

He gasped; the others preserved their gravity with difficulty.

Mrs. Bretelle's mouth twitched. She tried to sympathise with the wronged dandy; if she had consulted her own inclinations she would

have laughed; but she never did consult her own inclinations where Sir George, whom she adored, was concerned, any more than Lady Charlton consulted any inclinations in the world but her own.

Yet they were classed together as two ladies devoid of reputation, and only those who knew them intimately discriminated between them—the one a soulless, selfish profligate, and the other a woman true in word and thought and deed to the one love of her life—albeit an illicit one.

“The cake is under-done,” growled Major Bourne, and aimed at the hat. It fell in with a splash.

“Better shot than usual!” applauded old Tommy.

The two visitors started; then the journalist smiled reassuringly. In Rome do as the Romans do.

Mrs. Thompson quivered all over as her sister coolly dropped the crusts of her bread-and-butter into the unique slop-basin.

A sudden shocked silence fell, and everyone looked in horror and amazement at the luckless Miss Smith.

She crimsoned to the roots of her hair as she

caught the whisper: "Let it pass this time; it's probably only ignorance."

Sir George, who had never taken his eyes off his ruined hat, rose suddenly. "I feel a draught," he said, and stalked out of the room. When he reappeared he wore Prue's treasured French creation, and sat down calmly by the tea-table.

Everyone tittered except Prue, who gazed at him in an agony. "Do be careful!" she whispered. "I haven't worn it yet. I was keeping it for the garden-party. How ever did you find it?"

"I knew Miss Trevor's maid 'did' for you, and I said you wanted the hat you thought the most of," he whispered back. "Draughts give me neuralgia."

"Now everybody's seen it," she wailed; "and oh—*do* be careful!"

He looked meaningly at his own ruined hat.

When he rose to help himself to cake, he left Prue's hat in his chair, guarding it carefully with his body from its owner.

Of course he then sat down heavily upon it, and everybody was convulsed with secret merriment—save Prue.

"Oh, what a pity!" he said.

Prue made no reply; words were beyond her just then.

"Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander," said the culprit cheerfully. He took up the hat, regarding it critically, with his head on one side. "To think that was once feminine head-gear!" he exclaimed.

"At twelve guineas!" almost wept Prue. "One of the things I couldn't afford, and loved accordingly.

Sir George sighed, and placed it by the side of his own hat. "In death not divided," he said.

He was cramming his mouth vulgarly full of cake as he spoke, delightfully conscious the shocked eyes of upper-tooting were upon him.

Suddenly he clapped his hand to his mouth. "Oh, it's too full!" he exclaimed. "I simply *can't* swallow it, and it's vile stuff! Do you mind if I put it out, Malden? It's all your fault; you do a chap so badly at your rotten place!"

"Not on the floor!" cried Sir Peter imploringly.

"But I must! I have my constitution to consider," cried the baronet in a smothered voice. "I can use the window, can't I?"

He hung out of the window for a moment, and when he returned his mouth was empty.

"Sha'n't come again," he grumbled.

"I *asked* you to stay away," whined the host. "You know I did! But there was no stopping you—come you would. I suppose it was because the duchess was coming and the duke wasn't. And she used to kiss *me* every day but Friday—once."

"She still has a prejudice against Friday," sighed Sir George.

Prue dimpled, and the visitors had no further doubt that she was a daring young duchess.

By this time the hat had got an untidy litter round it, for not everyone was a first-class shot.

Suddenly a step they all knew and dreaded sounded in the hall.

"The devil-dowdger!" whispered Sir Peter, panic-stricken; "and she's fussy about her carpets. I think it's a case of 'rabbits!'"

"Oh, be quick!" panted a horror-struck company.

Upper-tooting, quite paralysed with astonishment, saw several "titled people" and one duchess scatter in the most extraordinary fashion. Some left by the window; others seemed

to fall on their hands and knees and utterly disappear.

If Mrs. Thompson had dared she would have gone into hysterics.

Then Lady Malden entered.

She looked at the two people the room contained, and then at the hat, the litter on the carpet, and suddenly she seemed to the two frightened ladies to grow from a short, rather stout, flat-faced woman into a Juno of amazing height and terrible majesty.

"Leave the room, you . . . *persons!*" she stammered out, her face growing purple.

The "persons" left—one of them hysterically.

"I know," said Sir Peter later, when she spoke to him about the matter. "I know, my dear; it was dreadful! We *did* try to let them see it wasn't etiquette, but they had no manners, and we supposed they did that sort of thing at upper-tooting."

CHAPTER IX

PRUE was quite the triumph of the evening in palest pink, her shoes and stockings the exact shade of her dress, the *tout ensemble* the envy of every woman present. Yet she was less high-spirited than usual, and not as keen on dancing as most of the men had hoped; in fact, she owned to being lazy, and insisted on sitting out.

Everybody wondered what was the matter.

"You're looking awfully down in the mouth," said Sir Peter anxiously, towards the close of the impromptu dance. "Do tell me what's wrong."

Jim Lascelles was not the only one who waited eagerly for her reply. She heaved a mighty sigh. "Well, it's not love," she said. "The fact is, I am merely disproving Euclid—I think it was Euclid—who said a lesser quantity cannot contain a greater. It can! My shoes are an instance. They are a perfect fit—in other words, I've got a three and a half

foot into a three shoe. The early Christian martyrs were nothing to it."

"Why don't you take 'em off or change 'em?" demanded Jim.

"That's the sort of question you *would* ask!" she retorted petulantly. "My foot never looked so nice before; besides, anything but a perfect match would spoil that art of the 'creation' I am wearing—and owing for. I've got to endure, but I can't dance. I shall have to get them stretched for next time. A fellow-flattist, Mrs. Stanley, who lives with only-Jane, has a smaller foot, and she will wear them for me when I go back."

Sir Peter reluctantly departed to seek his partner, and Captain Lascelles dropped into the vacant place. "I am so interested in Miss only-Jane," he said, "and you know I am stationed in Aldershot, which means practically living in town, so I thought you might give me an introduction."

"I should like you to know each other," Prue returned softly. She appeared quite unconscious of his transparent device to effect a double *entrée* to Mammoth Mansions.

Jim's clear, disconcerting glance was on her, looking into the very depths of her soul. "Your

people shall be my people, and your God my God," he said in a low voice.

"If you include my friends, you must include Sir Peter."

The young man said nothing.

"I think," went on Prue, growing reckless, "I should like you to marry only-Jane; it would be so very unsuitable! And that's why people usually marry, don't they?"

He pulled his moustache and smiled. "An excellent idea! I am going up to town to-morrow; may I take a letter from you? Can I offer my hand first call? My heart unfortunately happens to be lost—elsewhere."

"A thing lost can usually be found; and anyway, it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

"I've no intention of losing," he said very quietly.

"Have you been born under a lucky star, Captain Lascelles? Some people's luck consists in having loved, others in having . . . lost."

"And the best 'luck' of all is to win love."

"A wife?" with raised brows.

"*The* wife!"

"Then you have ideas on matrimony? An

institution invented for those totally devoid of ideas. Actually, of course, the majority of us marry out of a primitive dog-in-the-manger habit; we don't want him ourselves, but we are almost certain Z—— does. Therefore, the Voice breathes o'er Eden, and the most aristocratic person at the show of presents is the detective! And we give the poor bride something poor and cheap, but the rich bride, overwhelmed with good things, receives the worth of riches. So do we temper the wind to the shorn lamb, shearing it always a little closer; while on woolly fleece we hang fur-lined coats. Savagery destroys the weak; we starve, but keep alive. Truly civilisation covers a multitude of . . . tortures."

"What a cynic you are—or pretend to be," he said indulgently. "You don't believe half of it yourself, you know."

Prue shrugged her shoulders. "In tight shoes one naturally believes the worst," she remarked.

"What a little Mother Eve you are! I can quite imagine——"

"You can't imagine me treating Mr. Utterly Contemptible Adam as silly Eve did!" she broke in. "First of all, he wouldn't have

got any apple! I should have eaten it myself! Then I should have left him to bear the blame, and he would have had a sneaking respect for me ever after. I should have done my lord and master in the eye!"

"I suspect he would have adored you, whatever you did," he answered.

"Yes, as long as I retained my beauty and there were no other women in the world. Dear, faithful creature!"

Jim's hand dropped over hers and held it fast. "The man who loves you for what you are could walk through the Venusberg and not know the Venus fair!" he whispered passionately.

Prue caught her breath for a moment, and her colour rose, for her fingers were trembling under his, and she knew he knew it. She tried in vain to release her hand. His clasp tightened mercilessly.

"Why won't you give in now, since give in you must some day?" he demanded vehemently.

"Rubbish!" she said with brusque inelegance, trying to rise; then her voice changed; joyful welcome leapt to it and to her eyes. "Ah, here's Sir Peter!" she cried.

Jim's face grew black. He dropped her

hand, rage in his eyes. "I leave you to more welcome company," he said icily, and stalked away.

Because of a pain at her heart she would not acknowledge, Prue let Sir Peter claim freer privileges than usual, and the little *roué's* face was flushed and radiant.

"They all come to heel in the end!" he thought cynically.

CHAPTER X

REALLY, my only-Jane, I am surprised at you! I shouldn't have thought you capable of such things! A young man of the wonderful Greek-god-lady-novelist hero constantly calling upon you, staying ever so long! And I am not there to look after you and ask his intentions! Oh, Jane, are you quite sure they are strictly honourable? And that yours are the same? Mine never are!

I shall be home very soon, now, then I shall look into matters, and if there's no sign of wedding-bells in the near future, then the Greek god will hear a certain lady's very frank opinion! And you have "the *most* interesting" conversations, have you?

What a bad hypocrite you are—as if I didn't know the "conversation" is one shameless lady called Improper Prue.

You say he is as good and charming as he is handsome! Good gracious, how dreadful! You really should lend your admirer to the

museum! And you're so certain he loves me as man never loved before! Likely, isn't it?

I fear me, Madam Jane, that in spite of brothers-in-law, one afflicted (I think you said) with bow-legs, the other with crimson hair and neckties, you are still romantic. By the bye, is it the red or the bow-ey one who has a slightly reddened nose owing to an imperfect indigestion, and spends a fortune on soothing syrup or something of that sort? Does he take it himself or give it to his wife? Personally, I consider the wife under such circumstances needs soothing most. Of course, I read all your letters. Read them twice, as you might guess, seeing I never reply to your most leading questions.

I've found out something dreadful about you; you are a traitor in the camp—my camp. Your sympathies are with the pursuer rather than the pursued. In fact, you are a woman—a crime one might well blush for these “superfluous” days.

Of course I shall not change my mind. How can you be so silly? And equally of course he will be sick of the quest and have forgotten the colour of my eyes in six months. Fair women are plentiful in this overstocked land of ours,

and Captain Lascelles could have half a dozen admiring wives if the law allowed. What a pity it doesn't! Then every woman would have her third share of a husband! I think that's the statistics. I know it's something horribly depressing for the common or garden oh!-how-am-I-to-get-married? woman.

Yes, he behaves very offensively about Sir Peter, who naturally admires a beautiful woman, having the wife he has, and he is too "pushing" for my taste. So I bestow him upon you joyfully, my only-Jane, with the best wishes in the world. But mind, you must not coquette too much!

(A vision of the prim spinster coquetting made Prue lay down her pen and burst out laughing.)

Flirting is awfully wrong—for others. Give me plenty of notice to design something really wonderful (to match your bridegroom) for my bridesmaid's frock. We'll proceed to the altar "*Midst toil and tribulation, and tumult of our war,*" which is not sung at these occasions as often as it ought to be, if married

couples of some years' standing are anything to go by.

But "I'm sick of love," as the Psalmist says, and will talk of things which really matter.

I suppose you think my visit is never coming to an end. Well, Lady Malden finds me useful in entertaining the guests, for I amuse and interest *without* elevating (like those horrible lantern lectures, which only do the latter, and even that—when an explosion occurs—in a different manner to that advertised), and Sir Peter wants me to stay, well—because he's Sir Peter.

We're going to have a minister down next week—not Dissenting—the kind that do the government, you know. Oh, dear! another ambiguous sentence, but you understand what I *try* to mean.

He's a sort of uncle to Sir Thomas Larchmonte, who, poor little wretch, is making me feel quite worried. He takes such trouble to let me see he's not in the least interested in me, that—well, it makes me uneasy. I positively *dread* him falling in love with me; something tells me tragedy would come of it. He would take it hard, and Heaven knows he's warped enough. Of course he would remain

true to his determination not to offer to buy a wife—which he knows it means—but he would not get over it quickly, like most.

He's not the type of man who feels about the same attachment a rabbit feels for parsley for some girl opportunity throws in his way (such opportunity often becoming his mother-in-law), and thinks he may as well marry, as he won't have to put himself out to woo vigorously, or go through anything unpleasant for her sake.

If Sir Thomas had a body to fit his soul he would rejoice in overthrowing obstacles.

People say he's a funny little man because in a bitter way he makes a buffoon of himself, but he's not funny really, and never in his heart. Poor Sir Thomas! he's one of those tragedies who try to go about—not very successfully—in the guise of comedies.

He never shows me a glimpse of his real self now; it is as if he tries to keep me as far away from him as possible.

Lady Trevor offended him awfully the other day, and I don't think he will ever really forgive her. She's a great, big, muscular woman, and, possessing a tough hide, believes others are the same. She has about as much tact as

a gorilla (though plenty of cunning). I don't think you ever find tact and cunning together; they are too alike to dwell together in unity.

Sir Thomas was playing tennis with her against Captain Lascelles and ~~he~~^{me} and he slipped and twisted his foot for a moment, so that he could not stand up. Lady Trevor says she thought he had sprained his ankle. Anyway, she just snatched him up in her arms as if he was a baby and ran with him to the house and drawing-room sofa.

She could not understand his lack of gratitude.

She and the apostle are one stage nearer the holy estate; the apostle is not a rapid mover, and I imagine thinks he may as well leave the "courtship" to her, she being the most practiced of the two.

I don't think he finds his confidence misplaced.

The Morrisises are going. Hurrah! hurrah! We think they've been overpaid for those votes. Mr. Morris has been quite a different man the last few days, beaming all over—except when an awful fear they might be asked to stay on struck him.

Mrs. Morris is collecting material to impress

Milldom. I wonder if she lets our her stays in Oldham? I shouldn't think it mattered what one wore—or didn't—there.

She loves me less than ever if anything, and is always dropping poisonous hints about Sir Peter—especially if Captain Lascelles is within hearing.

She does it very crudely. I dislike crude rudeness (from others). Rudeness is meant to be an art and should be fine as a rapier, but Mrs. Morris belongs to the class devoid of the weapon of sarcasm, etc., and is rude with a bludgeon. She looks as if she means it, too—so fatally ill-bred!

Miss Burney is very busy at present. She ignores Mr. Hurlingame's great wealth so very cleverly it really seems certain she means to marry him. He is rude, too—with an iron bludgeon.

I pity his wife. He's the sort of man who would only respect a wife with money.

He is fond of hinting about the women who are "after him," and one is so helpless, for they *are*—in dozens!

The other day after Miss Burney had been especially attentive to him, he said: "I great-

ly enjoy chasing the wild dear—till it turns round and chases me!”

Not to her, but *at* her.

You see, he’s twice a millionaire, and such people never learn their value as men, which is often just nothing at all.

He does no good with his money, unlike the brother he inherited it from, and has a limited capacity for pleasure, save of the grosser kind—which is merely wallowing. The thought of his wealth makes one horribly envious. How one could enjoy it! How one could help with it! I try to believe that the poorer man and woman have a richer organism, a greater capacity for pleasure and zest of life to make up. Even a millionaire has only one stomach—and that is often defective.

He cannot buy another life; he cannot even buy love, though he can buy wives and mistresses by the score.

If all this wealth was attached to a fairly passable man, I fear me I should be tempted sorely, my only-Jane, and when I am tempted hard enough I fall heavily—like the majority of mankind.

It depends more on the strength of the temptation than the tempted, to my manner

of thinking. The righteous are more often the untempted or the weakly-tempted than not. I suppose the devil does not care enough about those sorts of triumphs; they are too small.

Big breaks are not in the line of the righteous, and it takes such a lot of little sins to make up to one vast one.

And I'd much rather live with the vast one than with countless little ones, which may be no more than those annoying habits which get on your nerves and finally almost destroy your sanity—certainly your pleasure in life.

But Mr. Hurlinghame is no temptation, therefore am I a good, noble-minded, unmercenary girl. I think he might be induced to purchase, *provided* he could be certain there was no prettier article to be obtained.

He naturally wants his money's worth. I hope he'll get it, for the value of such money's worth is so small—a body without a soul! Still, you mustn't suppose I'm prepared to marry a poor man—certainly not! I'm only looking for a rich man I can *like*, and if he's rich enough I shall of course like him enough.

Somewhat easy morality for myself, and as uneasy as possible for the rest of the world, *n'est pas?* What egotistical horrors we humans

are! Ever one law for ourselves, and another for the rest of humanity. I do hope my husband will be able to give in charity, as well as to that charity (meaning me) which begins at home.

Now, Mr. Hurlinghame is of course always talking about something or other he "can't afford."

Jane, I have made a most wonderful discovery; namely, that it is always those who can that can't; and those that can't afford that can. No, it isn't at all involved. Read it again.

Only the poor can afford to be extravagant, as they alone, it often seems, can afford to be generous.

Mr. Hurlinghame is a very plain man, of the pasty, unpleasant type of plainness, though Miss Burney *did* somewhat foolishly observe to Sir Peter the other day that she thought he had greatly improved in looks lately.

Sir Peter shrugged his shoulders and said cynically: "Ah, yes—since his elder brother's death."

The elder brother, a charming man, as generous as he was popular (no, I don't mean anything cynical), and engaged to a girl who adored him as he her, was killed three days

before his wedding in a horrible fashion, crushed to a slow, agonising death.

That poor girl! The thought of her haunts me! She is governessing somewhere, I believe, and even Sir Peter says she will never look at another man. Her wish was to live in a small cottage near the estate where her *fiancé* was so loved and carry on—in a small way—his good work among the miners; but though three days later she would have been enormously wealthy, the deeds hadn't been signed, and of course this Mr. Hurlingham "couldn't afford" her an income.

Doesn't the whole thing seem objectless and cruel? Strange indeed are the ways of Providence!

To our limited vision logic seems strangely lacking in the Higher Powers, yet there must be a reason for everything, else had chaos come long since upon the world, and all things ceased to be.

In the end I suppose we shall find it is humanity which is illogical. Am I venturing to be profane? How fortunate Mr. Cumer and Mr. Angis are not reading this! They are two clerical friends of the D. D.'s (devoted

devotee), who, hearing many of my flippancies, are much concerned as to the health of my soul.

They take it for granted I shall be weighed in the balance and found wanting; and it may be so. Yet are God's scales the scales of the little men? Does He too give short weight?

One of them is head of the Puritan League. He finds impropriety in everything.

Sir Peter says: "Lucky man! *I* have to look hard for it."

To the Puritan everything is impure.

He is a good man, according to his lights, all the same, strictly celibate, and eats sparingly. He believes in subduing the body—rather a delicate body and somewhat oversubdued to my way of thinking—and what he preaches he practices. Neither does he bend to earthly place or power, and I've seen him more humble towards a cottage woman than to Lady Malden, who is very much IT, as far as this neighbourhood is concerned. He is true to his principles, and I respect him—even though I am sure his principles are all wrong.

The type of man I loathe above all is the man whose voice on the seventh day may be heard loudest in the plea not to be led into temptation—and then spends the rest of the week looking

for it. And they are pretty good lookers, too, some of them—eh, Jane? And now the one serious and truly British rite of worship is about to be performed, the gong has gone, and I must go also, so adieu for a little longer, and be careful to put not your trust in princes—or Greek gods. This will be my last letter, I expect, so really adieu till we meet.

PRUE.

P.S.—You're quite wrong in your suspicions. Captain Lascelles bores me more than anything else. Besides, he is a prig.

CHAPTER XI

"MARRIAGE," said Sir Peter, with his sudden Puck-like grin, "takes the piquancy out of any situation."

"Hear! hear!" suddenly applauded old Tommy, whom everyone had imagined asleep in his corner. He eyed his severe-looking wife with a stealthy grimace as he spoke.

"I wonder why it was ever invented?" remarked Colonel Wylde.

"Ask the devil," suggested Sir Peter; then he burst into prolonged giggles, for Colonel Wylde had turned questioningly to Jenny Trevor.

"Oh, my dear chap," spluttered Sir Peter, "you really shouldn't show your thoughts so clearly." And Colonel Wylde, to everyone's amazement, went suddenly scarlet.

"I was merely going to ask Miss Trevor her opinion," he said stiffly.

Jenny looked defiant for a moment, then she

said coldly: "I do not think marriage was the work of the devil. His part came later—to make mankind unworthy of it"; and she turned a face, suddenly very haughty, from Colonel Wylde.

"You're a most undutiful daughter," said Lady Trevor with a shrug, gazing adoringly at her apostle, to whom she was now formally engaged. "I sometimes think my own daughter envies me," she added pathetically.

Jenny's eyes veiled her contempt as she said quietly: "I envy neither of you, mother."

Colonel Wylde chuckled. Jenny, whom her mother regarded as a mere worm, could turn, it seemed.

Everyone looked very astonished and delighted.

The apostle's clerical face grew dark. "What d'ye mean, Jenny?" he asked uneasily. Had the "others" had a bad time? he wondered. They had all died young. It was not a pleasant thought. And yet where else could he get a hundred thousand pounds settled upon him? The fact of his parentage was known everywhere.

His *fiancée* sought to please him by looking as young as possible, but it was one of life's

ironies that he was only pleased when she looked really old.

There was no record of her age, and she said she had been a "mere child" when her first marriage took place thirty-five years back. The apostle feverishly hoped she had been "getting on," and that she was nearer the middle of her sixties than the "fifty" she felt obliged to own to, because everyone cruelly remembered the date of her first marriage to Sir John Trevor.

She had no right to the name of "Lady Trevor," but as she had married obscure nobodies (with the exception of her second husband, a rich city man who had married her for her "title") since, she clung to the one insignia of note. Besides, she changed so often it would have been confusing. Peter the second would be her fourth husband.

Jenny could not bear her future stepfather, who, like his predecessor, was her junior. "I am naturally envious of my mother's success in the paths of 'holy matrimony,'" she said.

"'Holy matrimony!'" echoed Colonel Wylde to himself. "Jove! fancy calling it that! It's a shame Jenny has been left out of it. I wish I could help her to a husband——"

He was quite aware that while all men married were done for, equally so were women who weren't. He had an idea Jenny would make a companionable wife to the right sort of man, and it was scarcely pleasant for anyone with a regard for the girl to think of her depending upon the apostle and his bride for the very food she ate.

What about Larchmonte?

Colonel Wylde frowned. No, hang it all! the girl must have someone better than that. What a pity Hurlinghame was a brute! He sighed heavily, realising a little of the difficulty a "nice" girl has to get a "nice" man for a husband with sufficient of this world's goods to make the wheel of matrimony go round.

Prue, who was behind him, leaned forward, her face mischievous. "How you sigh when the subject of marriage is mentioned!" she whispered.

"I was thinking what a pity about Jenny Trevor," he returned in a low voice. "It seems so difficult; I had never realised——"

"What it means to be a superfluous woman, with nothing but matrimony or extinction?"

"That doesn't apply to you, at any rate. Even if you weren't so lovely every man falls

in love with you. You are clever, and could make your own niche anywhere, but Jenny is not gifted, she is just a . . . a 'home' woman—and she's never had a home."

"You seem to have Jenny Trevor on the . . . brain."

"Nonsense!" brusquely; "but it seems such a waste. There's something wrong somewhere. God forbid I should be the one to push a poor devil into matrimony, yet if I knew a decent chap, not a great friend, and I could help matters, I really believe I would."

"So do I believe it," replied Prue, dropping her thick curtain of lashes over her laughing eyes. "You and I will put our heads together and find Jenny a husband. Is that a bargain?"

"It is, indeed!" relieved. "What is there you can't do, Miss Prue?"

"I don't know yet," the girl answered demurely; "but this will be as difficult as anything. I hope she'll accept him."

"But of course she will," said the amazed colonel. "That's what she wants, isn't it?"

"The wheel of matrimony sticks without——"

"Money, yes. I thought of that myself."

"I was thinking of love rather than money," returned Prue a little sharply.

"Jove! I never thought of that. I imagined only very young people believed in love."

"I'm twenty-seven, and I believe in it."

"But a man with money usually falls in love with a fancy article, someone just 'out' and lovely," worried Colonel Wylde, "while a poor man has to marry where money is. So where does Jenny come in?"

"Ah, time will show."

"You have someone in your mind? I can see that. I hope he's a decent sort, Miss Prue. That girl could be very unhappy with a wrong 'un."

"He isn't a wrong 'un; he's a bit dull, that's all. A bit of an old bachelor, and doesn't know what's good for him."

"How old is he?"

"About fifty."

"Fifty! Ridiculous! Sixteen years her senior, and she is very young-looking for her age. She doesn't want an old fool. I meant a chap a couple of years her senior."

"But if she prefers the one of fifty?"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed the colonel in rather

a panic-stricken voice; "a man of fifty has done with that sort of thing."

"He can't have done if he's never *begun!*" retorted Prue.

"*What does she mean?*" thought the perturbed colonel aloud—a trick of his when at all agitated. "He must be about her own age," he insisted.

"Perhaps you are right. But why do you look so worried?"

"I am afraid it may fall through, that she may miss him, or something——"

"Or refuse him because he's incapable of giving enough?"

"But you said he was well-off."

"Really, you men think of nothing but your food and money!" snorted Prue. "I meant affection—the right sort of affection."

"And most of you women think of nothing but romantic bosh and sentiment," he retorted. "What's love? A man with money fancies a horse finer than another—he buys it! fancies a woman finer than another—he proposes to her. It's the same thing. He may 'love' the woman best at first; later he'll probably prefer the horse. If the horse doesn't suit he returns it, probably at a loss, but he cannot return the

woman; that transaction is *all* loss. There you are! And poets and novelists rave about 'undying love,' but I believe they only do it to sell their stuff, and believe in it less than anybody. Love is only a physical attraction, after all, necessary for the population of the world, and would be harmless and useful enough if civilisation hadn't stepped in and made marriage."

"And that has been your experience—so far?"

"When I was young and—er—that sort of thing. Only I never made it marriage—thank God!"

"Quite right, too, on such foundations, but there are others—respect, companionship, the love of the mind as well as the body, the thing that lasts, deepens with the passing of time. True, you don't see it often, but it's there, and that's what I want for Jenny. She would rather do without than take the second-best, for she's a fool."

"Then she's likely to spend her life in her mother's house studying 'husbandry,'" retorted Colonel Wylde, rising abruptly.

"*Silly ideas women have!*" he thought aloud.

Miss Trevor was standing looking out of a

far window, and the sympathy he felt for the poor girl impelled him to follow. He sat down close to her with a sudden feeling of well-being and content.

"Miss Prue and I've been discussing love and matrimony," he said tactlessly.

"How can you discuss what you know nothing about?" she said very sharply, and moved away with a flash in her eyes that absolutely deprived the astounded colonel of breath.

"And I thought we were friends!" he muttered aloud. "I suppose she thinks I'm an old blitherer, on a par with her damn-fool mother, but a man's in his prime at fifty, whatever a woman may be. If I wasn't so interested in her, I shouldn't go on trying to get her married, and it'll serve her right if that young oaf of thirty-five Miss Maunsell was talking about turns out a bad bargain. Women never know their real friends!" and he sat pulling his moustache and frowning, while Prue, who now had Sir Peter and Jim Lascelles on each side of her, kept going off into irrepressible little giggles.

"Do tell us the joke," implored Sir Peter.

"Oh, I couldn't," and she giggled again.

"I like those best. Whisper it."

"It's not that sort of thing. It's matrimony I thought a joke."

"To the lookers-on or the victims?"

"In this case the looker-on."

Sir Peter motioned towards his wife and pulled a face. "But it isn't a joke at all," he said. "It's a life sentence from which there is no reprieve save death. Some men have all the luck. There's Cholmaris—a year my junior—who's 'buried three,' as the poor women say, and is now longing for something very young and pretty. I wish I was!" His small, wiry fingers crept round hers. "I wouldn't look very far," he added in a whisper.

She could not draw her hand away without Jim seeing, and because she did not want him to see, she did not make the attempt. She did not guess his lover's intuition had told him the truth, and that he was waiting for the withdrawal—waiting feverishly.

She felt him stiffen, saw his face grow grim and a little contemptuous, and imagined he had overheard Sir Peter's whisper.

"One can look without finding," she returned, but Sir Peter did not mind the reproof; he enjoyed it, and his fingers tightened.

As Jim Lascelles had not heard Sir Peter's

whisper, the words conveyed nothing to him, and certainly did not soothe his raging jealousy and suspicion.

She felt his attitude and grew angry and reckless. "Even matrimony can be a success—when it doesn't last too long," she said. "Look at Lady Trevor."

"But *was* it a success from the husband's point of view?" grinned Sir Peter; "and what is my namesake going to get out of it? I believe she'll last out a couple more myself, and nothing would induce me to risk it—even in the apostle's place 'steal I cannot (he hasn't the brains), to dig I am ashamed.' Therefore take me matrimony!"

"Take my advice," he said, suddenly turning to Jim, "and don't marry—as long as you can live well on credit; a wife is always to the debit side. And between a marriageable and a married man there is all the difference between light and darkness, a winging bird or a mole. One is a prize, the other appraised——"

"Why on earth has everybody got the subject of marriage on the brain?" exclaimed Prue impatiently.

"Because it's a matter of such complete indifference and such horrible importance," sug-

gested Sir Peter. "And it's like the War Office, a sort of old Aunt Sally for people to try what they have of wit——"

"And ribaldry, spite and dirt——" interrupted Jim.

"Go away, Lascelles," said his host; "you are in a bad temper. Besides, you're 'trumpery.' Isn't he, Miss Maunsell? And if he'd any tact he'd know it."

"I don't think wit is Captain Lascelles' strong point—or tact either," drawled Prue, her eyes half-closed. With a sudden twitch she had recovered her hand.

"I shall stay where I am," said Jim like a sulky child, glaring at the two of them.

"And discuss matrimony?" enquired Sir Peter suavely. "You're about the only one who has left Aunt Sally alone. Come, let's see you hit *something*."

"He hasn't anything to throw with," baited Prue. "People have to appear superficially clever to say anything new about matrimony; even the Bible—St. Paul, wasn't it?—says it's best left alone, and *Punch's* advice is 'Don't.' "

She had the satisfaction of seeing Captain Lascelles look jarred at her mention of two such different sources of advice.

"Personally, I believe in marriage," said the young man defiantly, "as long as it's not a matter of 'common sense,' for which read convenience, or of the senses, which is a thing too brief to count. Such reasons must inevitably spell failure. But the best reason, founded on a real love, is fulfillment, not failure. People say it doesn't last, but few deny it is worth while once to have been. I think the majority should marry, wisely if they can, or as wisely as they can. But the insensately selfish or ambitious people, making ambition their god, should never marry unless they are sure the marriage will help, not hinder."

"Good little boy!" said Prue mockingly; "go up one. Is that all it knows about marriage? Ask teacher to give it two extra marks!"

"This elevated atmosphere is making my head whirl," objected Sir Peter. "I never could stand the heights—I always wanted to tumble down as quickly as possible—and marriage on the heights! Good Lord! it makes me think of the devil-dowdger, too, who now—the pathos of it—soars alone on the clouds, while I cry for a star on the earth. Go away and get normal, Lascelles. Lady Charlton has something to say to you."

"Yes, you really are rather overpowering," Prue said lightly to Jim. "Personally my *raison d'être* being to marry money *with* a title if possible, and no more mothers-in-law and things than I can help, you make me feel depressed."

"Well, there won't be any lack of bidders!" said Sir Peter, in his coarse, gallant way.

"The question is to find the highest," lamented Prue. "It would be so awful if one came to terms, and then found he was only the highest but one."

She looked up to find Jim walking across to Lady Charlton, and Sir Peter hurrying to answer an urgent friend on the telephone. But she was not alone, for Sir Thomas Larchmonte was regarding her intently, and she knew he must have heard.

There was a strange look in his small, blood-shot eyes, and his face was clammily pale.

"I heard what you said," he whispered thickly.

"I was only joking," she replied, and her face went pale.

Suddenly she grew frightened and would have fled, but Sir Thomas stood resolutely in front of her.

"Sell yourself to me!" he said between set teeth.

"Sir Thomas, this is not a subject for jesting——"

"Jesting! My God! I am driven to it. I was never more in earnest in my life. Sell yourself to me. I've tried not to say this, but it's got to be said—and answered. Let me be the purchaser. There is the title; it's old and once was honourable, and Larchmonte Keep would be a fit setting even for you. There are other places, and thirty thousand a year. You shall spend it all—ruin me if you like—my God! what do I care? I am little enough at any time, but I am nothing without you. I don't know whether it's a good or a bad love, and I don't care; I only know it's a great one—has me body and soul. I'm yours, mind, body and estate—abortion as I am! The biggest capacity for feeling is not always in the biggest body; seldom, I believe. I would burn my home and honour for you—such honour as there's left. I live in hell for you. I always shall, even if I win you—God! what a win!—just the husk, when I long for the kernel! I've had husks all my life; I've always fed with the swine. And now I want to buy you for my

wife, and pretend it's 'holy' matrimony! I want to pretend like a child—I want to die pretending. You shall have everything, everything, everything, for just one year of you! Before God I ask no more! Afterwards you shall lead your own life apart if you'd rather, but I shall have had a year, and for that I would gladly sell eternity. Oh, I am vile, loathsome, abominable in soul as well as body, or I could not ask such a bargain. I have fought against it with all my strength. But it was stronger than I—stronger than anything in the world, I think. I will be beautiful for you in my soul. I offer you no charnel house full of dead things, of rottenness, corruption, but a white palace lit up for your coming, darling, a white palace swept and garnished for you, where our souls might cling without your shrinking. The body is the least of such love as I have for you. Cannot you forget my vile body? Prue, hear me! For God's sake don't turn away——” And the trembling, misshapen hands caught at her dress.

“Oh, don't!” she cried, shrinking in terror, gazing on the distorted face in an agony of pity. “Someone may see, hear——” .

“There is no one; they are all in the other

room," he stammered. "I love you for the character you think to hide, for your wonderful beauty, your very faults as well as your virtues. I worship your vanity—though I am vainer far for you, my lovely Prue. Only a year, just one year! I will disappear, kill myself, leave you free afterwards. I swear it on my love for you. What is one year out of such a full life as yours? And you will not be cruel; your pity will help you to pretend for just that year. The jewels are famous. In your dull, dark-red hair the emeralds will——"

"Hush! oh, hush!" she cried unsteadily. "Don't say such things. You shame me utterly, you shame us both. Love cannot be bought or sold; it must be a free gift. I cannot give it you, dear Sir Thomas, though if I could I would."

"Because it is already given," he said very bitterly. "Oh, I am not blind. Lascelles is a fit lover, perhaps, but he doesn't love as I love. There isn't despair and self-hatred in his passion. He would not let love break him as it has broken me. He would still go on and make a success of his life, marry someone else later on, probably, and forget in the end. But I would never forget. He would not die for

a year of you as I would gladly die, or sell his honour for you as I would sell mine. He would not let you ruin him, steal his will, his mind——”

“Oh, don’t! don’t! You wring my heart, and I cannot help you. You would despise me if I sold myself to you——”

“It wouldn’t alter my love. I should love you whatever you did,” he cried chokingly; “in the midst of your blackest dishonour, with your hands dyed red in blood!”

“That is not real love; it’s a passion, an obsession, and it will pass the sooner and leave you peace. Be brave, Sir Thomas.”

“There is neither rest nor peace without you!” he answered despairingly.

She had her back turned to the inner drawing-room, and Sir Thomas, crouching at her feet, was entirely hidden.

Jim Lascelles, rid at last of Lady Charlton, strode towards the girl he could no longer keep away from, unconscious he was breaking in upon a scene.

“It must always be no,” said Prue firmly.

And then, even as the wretched passion-swept little creature burst into “Marry me, and——” the words were lost in a collision, an

exclamation, and Jim Lascelles, striking against him, flung him face downwards, a small, writhing heap.

"I beg your pardon!" Jim exclaimed in consternation. "I had no idea——" and he was turning away when the baronet staggered to his feet, and turned on him a face twisted with fury.

"You . . . *you*——" escaped him in a thick whisper. "Oh, it is fitting it should be you, Lascelles! Nature left me scarce a chance, and now you would take even that away. Damn you! damn you! damn you!"

"It was an accident," said Jim quickly, sorry for the unhappy man. "From where I was I could see nothing. Oh, I beg your pardon ten thousand times."

"What is the matter?" asked a high voice, and Sir Peter came quickly up to the little group, looking from one pale face to the other. "I thought I heard a fall."

"I tripped; it was nothing," Sir Thomas managed to say, but his voice was strained and difficult, and Sir Peter guessed something of the truth.

"The little . . . rat! A deformity!" he muttered in Prue's ear. "How dare he? Such

men don't enter into the scheme of things at all. Besides, he belongs to the 'mad' Larchmontes, which is enough. Swear you refused him!" His face worked jealously.

"Hush! You have no right to talk like this! He—it is a tragedy. Civilisation is so cruel; it should destroy such lives at birth. It is wicked to let the deformed live."

Sir Peter eyed her quickly. "Come," he said, "we will take a stroll through the conservatories, and no one shall tease you."

His glance, cunning and triumphant, met Jim's.

"Miss Maunsell has promised me my revenge at billiards," returned Lascelles, making a quick step forward and looking down possessively on Prue—perhaps a little too possessively, for she moved away with head erect.

"Thank you," she said to Sir Peter; "there is nothing I should like better"; and without a backward glance she left the room with the delighted little baronet.

The eyes of the two men who loved Prue met, both faces pale.

Sir Thomas was the first to turn away. "You see," he said bitterly, "neither the giant nor the

dwarf are in it. He will have it all his own way, as usual."

"He will not!" returned Jim, his face suddenly grey, tearing doubt and jealousy gripping him.

CHAPTER XII

IT is likely that Sir Peter, whose passion for the girl was rapidly becoming uncontrollable, thought the same, for never had she been so gracious, and the valuable ruby heart-shaped drop he had sent to her room had not been returned.

That night, when Miss Trevor's maid, Perkins, brushed out Prue's hair, she placed a parcel on the dressing-table. "For you, miss," she said. "I took it to Miss Trevor by mistake; then I saw your name on the paper."

Prue yawned and looked at the small, round parcel without interest. "I'll see to it to-morrow," she said. "I expect it's the ring I left to be mended in the village last week; it was promised for to-day."

Dismissing the maid with a pleasant good-night, Prue slipped a pretty dressing-gown on over her night-dress, and began a hurried letter to Jane Thompson.

She wrote steadily for some time, unconscious of the lateness of the hour, but at length the letter was finished.

She flung it down on the dressing-table with a yawn.

The parcel caught her eye again, and she took it up, unfastening the paper.

Then, when the ruby heart lay revealed, she gave a gasp of horror and dismay, and the truth at once flashed upon her mind. She knew who had sent it, and that he had supposed it kept.

"I must return it first thing to-morrow," she thought.

At that moment a sly tap came at the door.

She opened it unsuspectingly. Then she started back, for, to her horror and dismay, Sir Peter, looking more Puck-like than ever, darted into the room, and turning the key, slipped it into his dressing-gown pocket.

For a moment Prue, locked in with this ruthless *roué*, was frightened; then as she looked down on the five-foot-three Lothario, whose blue eyes shone like jewels, the fear passed, and she turned on him with head erect.

"What does this mean?" she enquired sternly. "Give me the key at once, Sir Peter."

He sidled up to her, tried to slip an arm round her waist, a man all the more dangerous because he appeared fantastic rather than wicked. "The devil-dowdger snores," he said plaintively.

In spite of her disgust the girl could hardly help laughing. It was not the actual words, but the way they were said, the comic expression on his imp-like face.

"That is no excuse for this . . . insult. Give me the key and go at once."

"Don't be so cruel and inhospitable. You are too sympathetic to be cruel."

"If you don't leave the room I shall call for help."

"Don't do that, my dear," he remonstrated, his head on one side. "Someone might come, you know."

Prue did not smile; the situation was no longer comic, but degrading—horrible. Her face grew suddenly damp. If he was heard! Seen leaving her room! If Jim, who already suspected her in his mind jealously, was to hear a whisper!

As she grew more alive to the danger, she leaned against the door, trembling violently, and Sir Peter crushed her in his small, wiry

arms. "You are adorable!" he said thickly. "I love you! I love you! I love you!"

She struggled with him, terrified at his strength, thrusting him away with difficulty. "Go, or I will arouse the house——"

"There are two versions to every explanation," he said suavely, his face suddenly wholly demoniac.

"They shall choose which to believe," she said quietly.

"People always believe the worst," he sneered.

"They will not!" she cried passionately, but her heart sank.

"I wonder what Lascelles will say about it?" drawled Sir Peter. "Well, my dear, the explanation will save you the bore of one proposal, at any rate."

Prue turned deathly pale, but desperation gave her courage. She dashed at Sir Peter, tearing the key from his pocket after a brief struggle, and unlocked the door with a loud, sharp click.

"*Now* you have aroused the house!" he cried shrilly.

"Go at once!" she returned; "but wait—I will see if the coast is clear——"

"You are less unsophisticated than I thought," he said cynically, deadly insult in words and glance.

"What do you expect from a toad but venom, and who takes account of it?" she cried, turning on her unscrupulous visitor with utter loathing and contempt. "But wait till I look down the corridor, and then go, unless you want the lowest on the estate to know you for what you are. To-morrow I leave your house! Is this the hospitality of a gentleman?"

"It is you who are being inhospitable," he returned. "What an actress you would have made, my dear!"

She slipped into the dim corridor and walked a few steps to the right, glancing about her cautiously.

She looked everywhere but into the alcove at the end of the passage, and there was nobody.

"*Go!*" she said between her teeth.

"*Au revoir*, my dear!" he returned insolently, kissing his hand to her ere she had closed the door.

He proceeded quickly along the corridor, and as he passed the dark alcove he paused—

it was an instinct as of murder in the air that made him pause.

He dragged the curtains back with a jar that even Prue heard in her room, and faced Jim Lascelles and Sir Thomas Larchmonte.

"It is fortunate a lady's honour makes me safe," he said coolly, looking at both men with quiet, triumphant impudence.

Sir Thomas, who was crouching in a corner, looked up with working face, but speech was beyond him.

Sir Peter turned to the other man, who, sick and shuddering, his face livid, leant back against the wall.

"Go safely—while you can!" Lascelles managed to force out between locked teeth.

And Sir Peter, with a light, mocking laugh, passed on.

Then Sir Thomas spoke: "What is your love to mine?" he gasped out. "I would take her from the very pit of hell. I'd take her from the streets. In spite of everything I will make her my wife!"

"I won't!" said Jim.

They looked at each other for a moment, then without another word the baronet turned

away and went to his own room, where he wept like a child.

Jim Lascelles did not weep; he stood there—hell in his eyes—rocking backwards and forwards, for a moment no longer sane; the foundations of the earth had slipped from under his feet, and the lowest gap of all yawned beneath.

Then suddenly he turned in his dementia and reeled to the girl's door. "Open or I'll break the door down!" he said savagely.

Trembling, Prue obeyed.

The worst had happened, it seemed. He had heard—seen—something to arouse his suspicion. He believed a horrible, unspeakable thing of her, but he should not remain a moment longer in that belief. She would explain everything. Even pride was less than this. Neither thought or cared about the unconventionality of their proceeding.

She stood aside as he dashed in, and turned bravely to face him. "Listen," she began, her voice weak and faltering, but he seized her brutally by the shoulder, bruising her, shaking her.

"You—you——" he said furiously, choking. "Is there nothing left? No honour among women? That vile old man! You show an odd

taste, madam! A perverted taste, it seems to me. Was there no younger lover? Since love is nothing, and passion all to you, why throw your youth to an old man? You might have honoured me instead. Why didn't you send the invitation to *me*? I would not have declined, I promise you!" He laughed savagely, pressing his fingers fiercely into the pretty shoulders.

"Couldn't you see I . . . admired you? Did you fear it was the purple light of love, rather than the bloom of young desire? Or did you fear I was over-virtuous? Why should I alone practise restraint since there is no ideal left to make better things worth while? So in future, my dear, give what you have to give—or sell—to me, instead of to that old man. I can buy jewels, too . . ." he pointed to the glittering gem upon the dressing-table. "I also can pretend wantonness is love. . . ."

"Have you finished?" asked Prue in a voice that for an instant arrested him. How strange her face was! How oddly white! But then it is never pleasant to be found out.

"Haven't I said enough?" he sneered; "or are you too modest to understand? I am ask-

ing you to be my mistress, instead of that old man's."

He took his hands from her shoulders and stood back, his face livid and working.

"And this is my answer," she said very quietly, and struck him with all her strength across the mouth.

"Brute! beast! foul-minded coward! I will never speak to you again. To believe the worst—to dare to believe the worst! To suspect me! To spy upon me!"

"Ah, it rankles . . . to be found out. But I did not spy, madam, neither did I suspect you—of this. I would as soon have suspected my own sister. I had been unable to sleep and gone to the smoking-room. Coming down the corridor I met Larchmonte. I tried to convince him that my conduct this afternoon had been quite accidental. In the middle of the discussion the lock of your door clicked sharply . . . and you glided out as if risen from sleep. We thought you were sleep-walking, and instinctively withdrew into the alcove, meaning to follow and see you regained your room unawakened. You returned, and let out . . . Sir Peter. Then—we under-

stood. He saw us. That is all. It is enough for me."

"Sir Thomas, too!" she cried shrinkingly; "but he—thank God!—he at least will know I am innocent!"

"Will he?" and he laughed harshly. "No, but he will marry you and pretend to believe it. You have played your cards very cleverly. I congratulate you upon your complacent husband. I regret I cannot congratulate him upon his wife. May I hope that my claims to your liberality will also be considered?" and with a bitter twist of his lip, he pushed her rudely from the door and went out.

Left alone, Prue stood for a moment as if carved into stone, then, with a low moan, she moved towards her bed and fell across it like one stricken with mortal illness.

When the sun came she had neither moved nor made a sound.

In another room, not far away, a man paced up and down like a tiger, his face horrible to look upon, for all comeliness had gone from it. In yet another, a small, stunted mockery of nature sobbed with fierce despair and acid hope.

Only Sir Peter, his features quite peaceful, slept the sleep of the just. He rose early,

the first to get down, and, as he waited for the other guns to appear, wondered if two among them would be missing; but last of all Captain Lascelles and Sir Thomas entered the breakfast-room. They looked far from refreshed, and, sitting down to the table without greeting anyone, made a pretence of eating.

When the guns started they kept behind.

Crossing the thicket, however, they chanced almost upon Sir Peter, hurrying on alone in front, and suddenly they raised their rifles, and the same evil light shone in both faces.

Then Jim dropped the barrel down, and his face flushed with shame. "I cannot shoot a man in the back," he said roughly, "murderer though I may be in intention."

"It would not be wise," returned Sir Thomas, his hands trembling, "for it must look as if his own gun went off through the trigger being caught in the thicket. He is notoriously careless."

Jim looked sullenly ahead. "He is safe from me," he said curtly. "*She is not worth it.*"

He strode on alone, losing sight of his companion and Sir Peter, and joined Major Bourne. He was at the far end of the wood,

when a shot and a cry shrilled suddenly in the silence.

"Good God! Markam's plugged a keeper at last!" gasped Bourne, and hurried to the spot whence the sound came.

Lascelles followed, his face suddenly damp. He *knew!*

Together they saw Sir Peter lying on the ground, his gun by his side, Sir Thomas bending over him.

"The trigger's been caught in the thicket!" gasped Bourne as he ran. "We were always warning him."

"I will go and help Larchmonte. You get back to the motor and send up help—a doctor!" commanded Jim, and Major Bourne, glad to have something definite to do, turned at once.

When Jim got to the scene of the tragedy, Sir Peter was unconscious, his eyes already glazing.

Sir Thomas looked up, a glitter of madness in his eyes. "His own trigger caught in the thicket," he said jerkily. "I worked it like that! Nothing can be proved. Only you and I know. I have earned her now—she is all mine! Mind you stand out of it!"

"He's coming round!" said Lascelles sharply, and he raised the dying man's head.

Sir Peter's eyes opened, and he gazed at the two men without speaking. Then a ghostly smile flickered round his lips. "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" he gasped faintly.

They were silent.

"I'm done for," said the baronet with an oath. "Damn it! damn it! damn it! And the cup was not yet drained. There was Prue. In the end I should have succeeded. I nearly trapped her last night. And to die like this, like a dog——"

"I will convey your last messages to your . . . mistress," said Jim roughly. "Speak——there is not much time——"

"She is not my mistress—worse luck!" Sir Peter muttered thickly.

"You'd say that in any case——"

"Of course! And ninety-nine times out of a hundred it would be a lie, and once the truth. This time it is the truth. I thought it would be easy—it wasn't. I thought she was light—she isn't. I made up my mind to win by foul means or fair. I was mad about the girl. I tricked her into admitting me unsuspectingly last night; she turned me out of her room. You

saw. I was glad you would believe the worst; it would make it easier for me, and now at the point of victory I am cut off in the midst of a frustrated sin, damn it! damn it——” His face and tone carried conviction.

Lascelles’ turned grey. “My God!” he whispered. “My God!”

Sir Peter laughed eerily. “So she’ll marry you in the end.” He winced. “And I shall not be there to relieve her ennui when she is tired of you—but Larchmonte is left!”

His laugh grew shriller, and laughing thus, he died, the blood welling from his mouth.

Everything amused him: love and life, death and hate, sin and passion and flaming desire. He laughed at them all, this Puck who was never to win a soul for himself.

His spirit fled in the midst of his ribald mirth to join those others waiting in outer darkness outside the gates of Eternity, and laughing without mirth that they might enter neither hell nor heaven.

Jim turned his eyes away from the blood-stained, carrion thing, his thoughts winging to Prue.

He wished he had never been born. In the midst of that terrible stillness of death his own

words shrilled into vivid life and shrieked at him, making him writhe and groan in agony.

He had said those unspeakable things to *her*! Poured upon the girl he loved—a girl white as snow—the foulest abuse——”

Could any woman ever forgive? And Prue so proud!

He would abase himself to the earth. But would she listen? The thing was without excuse. He had condemned her unheard.

Sir Thomas looked up across the dead between them. “She is mine,” he said chokingly; “mine by every right. I have sinned for her, suffered for her, was ready to give her my name in her supposed dishonour, face the world for her. What have you to put against that? You flung her off! She is nothing to you—nothing! I would kill you, too, rather than let you have her. I would shoot her as I shot this beast rather than let her go to another. Swear you will not interfere and you are safe. She is mine, mine, mine!” His voice rose piercingly.

“I don’t think you need trouble,” said Jim wearily. “I have no chance. I forced myself into her presence last night and flung the dead-

liest insults at her in brutal, vile words. I—even you need be jealous no longer.”

“I am glad,” said Sir Thomas, rising, “for she must marry me now you have failed her. Your conduct must have killed her love——”

“Do you mean . . .?” Jim caught his breath suddenly.

“Yes, but not now; she is too proud. You have lost through your own fault—lost, lost, lost!” He laughed wildly, his eyes reddening—unsightly.

Then came the others running, the final stages of the tragedy, the hurried explanation, the gun lying in the obvious position.

“I have warned him often,” said Colonel Wylde gravely, “but he was too impetuous ever to listen or to care.”

“He has paid for it,” said Major Bourne, and two alone knew how heavily he had paid.

The body was carried home to a startled and shocked house-party, and Lady Malden, supported between her two clerical advisers, raved as to the destination of her husband’s soul—a matter about which she seemed to have little doubt, and certainly did not give him the benefit of it.

All save the members of the family made a

hurried departure, and Prue, the events of the last twelve hours stupefying her, packed with the help of Perkins.

She took up the ruby heart when she was alone and looked at it with a shudder. The price of shame! She had had no time to return it, and now it could never be returned. He had died believing she had kept it; that she could take, but not pay.

Innocently in one man's eyes she had appeared a wanton; now in her own, and as innocently, she stood revealed a cheat. If only she had realised—in time—the fatal significance of that little paper parcel!

And now what was to be done with it?

It was as impossible to keep it as to return it. And the thing seemed to scorch into her flesh like an evil flame.

At last a desperate way out of the difficulty seemed to suggest itself. She hastily made it up in the same paper, printing inside: "To my future daughter-in-law," making "Lady Trevor" out of the name which had been hers, and rang for a housemaid.

"This was left by mistake by Miss Trevor's maid," she said hurriedly. "I believe it is Sir

Peter's writing, and was meant for Lady Trevor. Will you please take it to her room?"

The strategy—if such it could be called—met with success. The original destination of the pendant was never guessed, and Lady Trevor exploited her father-in-law's generosity with great pride on her wedding-day.

"Something new," she explained, "to bring me good luck." She was a great believer in wedding superstitions.

The ruby heart, however, failed as a talisman, for the bride was killed three months later in a motor accident, and her husband thereby becoming a rich man promptly led a daughter of the chorus to the altar, and lived happily ever afterwards.

Jenny came to say good-bye to the one friend she had among the women of the house-party. "I am sorry I shall not meet you daily any longer," she said despondently. "I suppose we travel as far as London together? Mother has made up her mind to be married as soon as it is 'decent,' and there will be a lot for me to see to. I am getting handy through experience."

"I had wanted to ask you if you would come to me," said Prue hastily, "but there has been

no time even to think. I can get a couple of bedrooms on the same floor as my flat for you and Perkins, for there's a furnished one next door still unlet. But I live in rather a happy-go-lucky bohemian fashion——”

“Do you really mean that?” cried Jenny, her eyes glowing. “It sounds too good to be true. I cannot tell you how I would like it.”

“Then come straight back with me to-day—if Lady Trevor doesn't mind.”

“She will not mind,” said Jenny eagerly. “After all, I am a failure, you know, and naturally mother does not care to tow me about more than necessary and advertise the fact, or that I was born thirty-four years ago.”

“Then that is settled,” said Prue with a sigh of relief. “I shall love to have you. I'll telephone through to Martha, and we can go straight up from the station confident of finding everything ready.”

Colonel Wylde was staying for the funeral, and Prue, even in her own trouble, found time to draw the middle-aged bachelor aside.

“Good-bye,” she said. “I am sorry we are parting under such tragic circumstances. Will you look me up at Mammoth Mansions when you are in town? I want to ask your advice

about Jenny—she's coming back to stay with me, by-the-bye. I suppose we shall have to wait for the three train."

"I am glad Miss Trevor is going to you," said the colonel heartily. "Of course I will look you up with pleasure. We might do a gallery or something together. But, my dear Miss Prue, you are looking ghastly; this terrible affair has unnerved you; go and keep quiet in the little red room till train time. You are sure to be undisturbed."

"I think I will," returned Prue with a forced smile. "Thanks for the suggestion."

In the red room she would avoid the dreaded encounter with Captain Lascelles.

CHAPTER XIII

"I SHOULDN'T have thought she'd have gone to pieces so soon," mused Colonel Wylde as he watched her retreating figure. "I'm glad she's taking Jenny."

In the distance he noticed Lascelles coming towards him, and regarded that young man's white face with surprise. "The younger generation are all nerves, it seems to me," he muttered to himself.

"Has Miss Maunsell left yet, do you know?" asked Jim anxiously. "I must see her especially."

"Ha! a love affair!" thought the colonel, startled. "Well, they're a suitable enough pair. I'd better tell him, I suppose," and he gave the desired information.

Jim crept to the door of the red room, trembling like a whipped dog. The thought of facing her utterly unnerved him. How could he look her in the face and remember——

She was sitting on a low chair in the window,

her face white and strained, her wonderful beauty almost eclipsed, but her eyes turned to the eyes of a Medusa when she saw the intruder.

"Did you leave an insult unsaid last night?" she demanded.

He could not look her in the eyes for very shame; he just flung himself down on the ground at her feet and sobbed, his tears wetting her shoes.

She drew them sharply away, aversion on her face.

"For God's sake, forgive—forget!" he said thickly. "Hound that I was. I was in hell—mad! In my torture I knew not what I said!" He clutched frantically at her skirts.

She rose to more than her full height, it seemed to him, drawing her skirts away with a jerk.

"I will tell you what you said," she exclaimed through clenched teeth.

"For God's sake——"

"You said I showed an odd taste to give myself to an old man," she went on mercilessly, hitting fiercely like a thing in pain. "You suggested I should have sent for you. You were kind enough to say you would not have de-

clined the invitation. You were not over-virtuous . . . *either*, you gratuitously informed me. You added I might give—or sell—my worthless gift to you, and you would pretend it was worth while and pay . . . in jewels! And lest I should mistake your meaning, you asked me to be your mistress instead of an old man's. . . .”

“God!” he groaned. “*God!*” and would have crawled towards her like a cowed dog.

“So you have learnt the truth?—how it matters not; perhaps Sir Peter in dying . . . But for that you would have believed the foul thing. And you ask me to forgive. It was such a trifling matter, wasn't it? So easily forgotten—so quickly forgiven!”

“I do not ask you to forgive yet, only to let me earn your forgiveness—some day. My punishment is greater than I can bear, for I love you! I love you!”

“You put it differently . . . last night.”

“I——”

“That was why——”

“I have wanted you for my wife from the first,” he said desperately.

“That wasn't the term you used . . . yesterday.”

He winced.

"To think that through a moment's madness I have lost you!" he groaned.

"You cannot lose what you never had."

"But some day I might have won you. I love you so! I love you so!"

She turned away, laughing cuttingly.

"I'd burn in hell for you——"

"I am not interested in your . . . future, and I think you had better go."

And like a beaten hound he went.

BOOK II

CHAPTER XIV

JANE THOMPSON started as her eyes fell on Prue's white face; then she touched her hands softly without speaking.

Prue made an effort and smiled. "This is Miss Trevor," she said, "and I want my old friend and new friend to like each other. You ought to be already acquainted by proxy."

The two women shook hands warmly.

Then, while Martha showed the visitor and her maid to their rooms, the two friends faced each other. Neither spoke.

Jane Thompson turned away first, her own face white, for a new and strange and rather terrible Prue had taken the place of the old. Her love told her her friend had been cruelly hurt, and she drew her breath sharply. She was the last to intrude on another's sorrow, and she waited for Prue to tell her or not, as she pleased.

Prue's face was drained of all colour, there

were great shadows under her eyes, while her lips were rigidly set. She looked as one refusing to bend beneath a crushing blow.

A great wall of constraint, barring them from one another, reared itself between the two friends. They were both reticent women where their deep feelings were concerned, and every moment the silence grew more painful.

"Of course you have heard?" Prue said at length. "'They are calling it in the streets; the evening papers are full of it.'"

"Yes. Oh, Prue, how awful!"

She did not look at the girl; a sickening fear lest the change was in some way due to the tragic death of the evil *roué* gripped her. In her letters Prue had failed to hide a certain fascination Sir Peter possessed for her. Had she actually fallen in love with him? Or was there something still more horrible behind the horrible tragedy. Had someone murdered Sir Peter? She thought of the half-mad Sir Thomas, whom she suspected of being in love with Prue, and then as she thought of Captain Lascelles, her knees knocked together and her heart turned to water. She turned livid and sank into a chair.

He had not been able to hide his jealousy of

Sir Peter, and once Jane had seen a look in the young man's eyes which told her that under an iron self-control lay violent passions.

Was there a tragedy within a tragedy?

She dare not speak his name because she knew she could not mention it naturally. She waited breathlessly for Prue to name him instead. But Miss Maunsell stood with her face turned aside, resting her shapely foot on the fender, making no attempt to broach the subject at all. Instead, she spoke of other matters, and though her mouth did not relax its set lines, her voice was light—too light, Jane thought.

"I have brought Miss Trevor back with a purpose," she said—"a match-making purpose, and I want your help to enact a little comedy. A certain Colonel Wylde is attracted to her, though he does not in the least understand the attraction. I think it may all come right with a little help."

"If you tell me what I've got to do, you may depend upon my doing it," replied Jane.

"I really must go and change for dinner—it is nearly eight. I suppose Toby will turn up later to see I haven't hopelessly deteriorated with my sojourn in smart society. What

a bore he is! What a bore everything is!" She jerked her foot impatiently off the fender. "Of course I am taking it for granted you are dining with us too," she added, "and then if Toby comes we'll have a fourth at bridge, and he can't poke into bills and things. Cupid ruined my twelve-guinea hat, and the bill's in for the third time. Even if I had the money to spare, it's unreasonable to expect me to pay for a hat I've never worn. And oh! my pink shoes are a little tight, and I want Mrs. Stanley to wear them for a day or two. My clothes were as nice as anybody's—or nicer. It made me feel real good."

She was talking rapidly, as if against time.

Jane was trying to hide her nervousness as she waited for the one name to be mentioned. Her thoughts had dwelt very often on Captain Lascelles, whom she had got to know better than any man in her life, and whom she thought of as something far superior to ordinary manhood. He was more than perfect man—physically, mentally, morally: he was the realisation of old dead dreams and ideals. In a word, he was the fairy prince. The little spinster was as romantic as a schoolgirl. Prue, of course, was, as ever, the fairy princess, and

Jane imagined wedding-bells and a perfect pair made one.

But now the dream lay broken, and she scarcely dared ask herself how the shattering had taken place.

She seemed to see Sir Peter lying in a pool of blood, and Jim Lascelles, with an expression she had once seen in his eyes, bending mercilessly above the dying man.

Did Prue know or suspect? Was her heart with the murdered—or the murderer? Either way lay desolation.

She felt Prue wished her to be the one to break the ice, and, looking away from the girl, she nerved herself to the effort.

“How is the Greek god?” she managed to say with assumed lightness.

She felt, rather than saw, the girl’s whole figure stiffen.

“It is just as well you happened to mention him,” said Prue evenly, “for I want your promise that you will not receive him in Mammoth Mansions. He is no longer an acquaintance of mine. I cannot run the risk of meeting him in the lift.”

There was a dead silence.

"I suppose I must give my reason," she added in a strained voice.

"Your wishes are enough for me," Jane returned hurriedly. "Perhaps I can guess." Her face was white and horror-stricken. So it was the worst!

Prue looked at her strangely. "What do you guess?" she said.

"I would rather not say."

"I must ask you to say."

"He—he shot Sir Peter!" Jane gasped.

To her surprise, Prue laughed harshly. "If it had been only that!" she cried passionately. "Do you think I would blame him for killing that . . . carrion? If he had shot Sir Peter down like the dog he was, I should not have cared. The world might be a better place if men were more primitive. No, Jane, the wrong was to me. He insulted me in a fashion which is beyond words. He chose to believe me vile. He chose to say vile things—my God! the very thought of it makes me understand how easy a thing is murder. If I could have killed him then I would! And now he knows the truth, that he accused me falsely, and asks me to forgive and forget. That is all!" She laughed savagely. "Just to forgive and for-

get! So easily said; so easily done. But I will never forgive, never forget on this side of the grave or beyond it. Now, do you understand why we cannot meet?"

"Oh, my dear! my dear! and he loves you so—worships you! I don't want to know anything more; perhaps"—very humbly—"I might not understand; but in his rage—his pain—for it would be agony to suspect you—he knew not what he said. Don't spoil his life, dearie! Don't spoil your own, for you would not take it like this, unless——"

"Unless——?" demanded Prue with a sneer.

"You also cared."

"I might have been in danger of caring . . . once," the girl returned icily, "but my eyes were opened in time. I saw him as he was, not what I thought him, and I was saved. The only man I could love is the man who would trust me under any circumstances. I have never met such a man, and till I do I can never care. And now, if you don't mind, we will never refer to the subject again."

"But he arranged to come in for tea tomorrow!" exclaimed Jane. "I must see him, if only to explain——"

"Very well; see him this time and let him

understand quite plainly. Jenny and I will be out for the afternoon, and you must promise he's gone by six."

"Very well."

Jane went to her own room to change, looking especially worn and old and a little primmer than usual. Those visits of Jim Lascelles had come to mean so much in her life.

He would ask her help, and, though her heart longed to give it, as she would gladly have given her life for him or Prue, she would have to refuse, for at all costs she must be true to the girl whose coming had brought light where hitherto there had only been darkness and drab duty.

Austin Hargraves came after dinner and gazed at Prue in dismay. "You're looking ill," he said uneasily.

"My dear Toby, one does not return from a tragedy looking beaming."

"A good riddance to bad rubbish!" said the solicitor a little brutally. "He's done harm enough, and his successor is a moderately decent man with a capable wife. It will be the saving of the estate. Sir Peter's extravagances were ruining it. He presented farms, in the shape of jewelry, to too many to retain much."

Rutter's farm went the other day—I wonder whose neck it hangs round?"

A painful flush dyed the girl's face as she thought of the ruby heart. Had that meant Rutter's farm, and was Rutter the worse in consequence? Would the newcomer turn out the hard-working farmer who had redeemed so much land from waste and expected to pass the tenancy down to his son?

She felt suddenly horribly guilty, as if it was all her own fault.

"Oh, I've had enough of 'smart-setting' for a while," she said hastily.

"I'm glad to hear it. I should have opposed your going more if I had not hoped you would end by being disgusted."

"Perhaps I was. But come to the other end of the room, and we'll join the rest."

"I came to talk to you," he returned, his sallow face flushing. "It—it seems a good while since I saw you."

"My dear Toby, do you know, that's a compliment! I believe you've started embezzling. Do tell me how much you've borrowed, and if you're going to Spain. If it's an awful lot, and you were to ask me very nicely, I might

come, too. Spain is awfully fashionable just now."

"I pride myself on my honesty," said Mr. Hargraves, his mouth tightening. "I don't mean in the broad sense; all reputable firms are that—they've got to be, it pays—but in little ways. Just a few costs *made* necessary, and one's income might be doubled——"

"You glory in your deficiencies. You can't be awfully eligible, after all, if you're so horribly honest. And is St. John's Wood wearing sables at present?"

"Well," said Mr. Hargraves with a sigh of relief, "you're just the same scatter-brained Prue, after all."

"Oh, just the same," she agreed lightly. "What change should there be?"

"I was afraid," he said hesitatingly, "that you might leave your heart behind."

"So I did—in fragments—a piece here, another there, and a little more for the next comer. I wonder *who'll* be the next comer, don't you, Toby?" and with a low laugh she swept him towards the bridge-table.

CHAPTER XV

JANE, her thin cheeks alternately flushing and paling, her eyes fixed feverishly on the clock, waited in her sitting-room for Captain Lascelles.

He was due any moment now, and in spite of a wakeful night and long, uneasy day, she was no nearer being prepared for his coming.

She had something to say to him, and did not in the least know how she was going to find courage to say it.

She drew her breath sharply when she heard the whirr of the lift and then the familiar foot-step, and her heart gave a great leap, bringing the hot blood to her face.

They shook hands in silence.

She was startled by his changed appearance, for his brown face was pale and drawn, and he saw she knew at least something of how matters stood, and had nothing good to tell him.

She was the first to speak. "Captain Las-

celles," she said clearly, "I am very sorry, but I can't receive you here any more. This is to be the last time. I want to be quite frank with you. I'd help you if I could, but I can't. I must be true to Prue. I have given my promise."

"It's my only chance to see her," he said hoarsely, "and she might relent in time. I have offended horribly, but if I was able to plead my own cause I might succeed in the end. Otherwise it's hopeless. And I too will be frank—I can't live without seeing her. We have been in the same house for nearly a month; I have seen her almost every hour of the day, and though it's only a few hours since she sent me away, the—the longing to see her, be near her——" His voice died away in a husky whisper.

"I know! oh, I know! but I can do nothing. I have promised. I know Prue; she's as firm as rock, and won't give in. I don't believe she knows how to. You cannot come to Mammoth Mansions."

"I can and must and will," he said, setting his teeth.

"Then you will drive her away—but you won't gain anything."

He began to pace restlessly up and down. "Think, you are a woman—a woman is so much more quick-witted than a man. Isn't there some way out, some way of getting round your promise?"

"For shame, Captain Lascelles! Is that your idea of truth and honour?"

"I beg your pardon, but I cannot lose now. I was getting in sight of the goal when my own folly—— If you can't help, you won't hinder, will you?"

"I shall take no part whatever, either way," said Jane firmly; "and now I am sorry to seem inhospitable, but I must ask you to go." He wrung her hand without speaking and left the room.

Jane locked herself in her bedroom and wept the slow, difficult tears of one unaccustomed to such a luxury.

Jim rang for the lift, staring gloomily in front of him. He had come to an *impassé*, it seemed.

"Captain Lascelles!" screamed a voice; "why, I thought you were going to have tea with us"; and Mrs. Stanley, attired in a very smart new gown, came out of her room. "You mustn't go away without seeing me." She

made a dive at the sitting-room door as she spoke. "Why, Jane has gone!" she exclaimed. "Well, you *are* being badly treated, and here's tea just coming in. Now, I will take no refusal."

The vivacious lady bustled him into the sitting-room, and, sinking into a chair, eyed him with frank admiration.

"It does me good to look at a man," she said in her rather shrill tones. "The things here are mostly specimens, and wear their clothes all wrong. But you're looking seedy. Such a bad colour! No wonder—that awful tragedy! Or is your liver out of order? My poor husband died of his liver—after first leading me rather a life of it. Now I have it myself at times—the result of twenty years in India, but I don't intend to die of it for another thirty years, and there's nobody to lead a life, Jane being an angel, and the second husband I once thought of taking unto myself having gone into the High Church—all vestments and things, and being dull in Lent, which I couldn't have borne!" and she ended with her usual shrill giggle.

Jim hesitated. Could she help him? He knew that if she could she would, for she was

as kind-hearted as she was scatter-brained and inconsequential. And even a forlorn hope was better than none.

"The truth of the matter is, Mrs. Stanley," he replied, smoothing his hat, "that Miss Maunsell is very offended with me, and refuses to give me the chance of winning her forgiveness. Not only has she forbidden me her flat, but Miss Thompson, acting on her instructions, has said she will no longer receive me here."

"Oh, dear! But I've made no promises; you shall come every day. I will get Prue in here on some pretext or other, and then you can make it up——" Then her face clouded. "But I forgot Jane. Such an obstinate woman, though the best in the world. No, that's no good, we must resort to strategy——"

"I must see her even if she won't see me," he persisted. "I can't do without. What a tangle it is; if there was only some way out!"

Mrs. Stanley began to giggle, then she clapped her hands and danced round the room. "You must be Major Muggins," she said.

Jim stared.

"When I was in India," the widow explained, "I acted in a play called Major Muggins' Strategy—a comedy. All you've got to

do is to follow his example in real life—oh, I know it's a horrid name, but that doesn't affect you—and there you are, you know. You see her every day, talk to her, perhaps plead your cause, at least——”

“What do you mean?” he asked desperately. “If there's the faintest chance of seeing her, do you think I'd hesitate at *anything*?”

“But would you sacrifice your moustache?” she asked.

He stared helplessly.

“But no, you needn't; it could be dyed for the time being. In fact, Captain Lascelles, you've got to be disguised and somebody else. I've got a sort of cousin coming home from the bush Prue is awfully interested in, and you can be *him*. She says he sounds so delightfully primitive. You could easily be primitive, couldn't you? I think if you had lots of red hair and beard and whiskers and things, and rough clothes, and slouched and talked in a gruff voice, she'd never know you, and get to like you for yourself, don't you see?”

Her cheeks grew pink with excitement.

“I know the sort of play,” said Jim coldly. “The real chap always turns up and the impostor is kicked out—greatly to the joy and

amusement of everybody save the impostor. It's rather funny—to the lookers-on."

"But he isn't due just yet, and in the meanwhile——"

"It's out of the question, Mrs. Stanley. I should be making myself ridiculous to no purpose."

"Prue is awfully interested in him, quite prepared to see a lot of him and fall in love; she loves primitiveness, she says."

Then Jim became conscious of quick jealousy of the bushman. His blood leapt at the thought of taking his place, seeing Prue frequently, perhaps becoming a friend on his own supposed merits. At any rate there was everything to gain and nothing to lose. Still, he mentioned several objections and difficulties, but Mrs. Stanley, who was set on the thing, played successfully on his jealousy.

"I will do it," he said at length; "only do not let Miss Thompson know—do not let anybody know. The fewer in the secret the better."

She promised readily. "Won't it be fun!" she cried, delighted. "Just like a real farce!"

"I do not look at it quite in that light, Mrs. Stanley."

"Come on Thursday as Bob Chorley, and I will arrange that Prue receives you alone. Then you will get to know her well at once."

A few more preliminaries and the mad project was settled.

CHAPTER XVI

PRUE was not surprised, though none the less dismayed, when Sir Thomas Larchmonte was shown in. She deplored the chance that left her alone that afternoon.

His appearance was not reassuring; there was something about him—though she knew not what—that made Prue think of the father and great-grandfather who had died mad.

“You’re not glad to see me,” he said bitterly; “that is only too plain. But I had to come. I cannot keep away from you, or eat or sleep, or be a man at all without you, and you must marry me now, Prue. It is my right. When you know all you will see you cannot refuse.”

He grasped her hands feverishly.

She disengaged herself, looking down upon the little, passion-swept creature with pitying eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said firmly, “but everything has been said. It must always be no. Be brave,

Sir Thomas, conquer yourself, fight for sanity——”

“What do you mean by sanity?” he cried very sharply, shrinking at sound of the word.

“I meant this—this love is only a temporary madness——”

“*Madness!*” he echoed in a queer voice. “Don’t use such words to me. No one ever mentions that term before me. Haven’t you noticed it? Don’t you know, few members of our family can hear that word without a shudder—too many of us have died mad. But I am sane, Prue—I swear it. I would not have you marry a madman. I love you too well. Marry me and drive the shadow hanging over us and our house away forever. Refuse and doom me to the family curse if you dare! Forgive me—I did not mean to threaten, only you belong to me now. I would have married you in spite of what I believed, when Lascelles cursed you for a wanton. I told him I loved you just the same, would stand by you in the face of the whole world. Doesn’t that count a little?” He clung to her dress, sinking on his knees before her.

“Dear Sir Thomas, of course it counts, but

I cannot give you any other answer. I thank you, but nevertheless it must always be no."

He pressed his small, ill-shaped head against her knees. "I've won you," he cried thickly. "I've come through blood to you. The trigger did not catch in the bushes. I was lying hidden there. I killed him because I thought he had harmed you. You are mine by every right."

"You killed him!" she exclaimed, horrified.

"Are you going to betray me to the law? Is it not right to destroy vermin?"

"I wish you hadn't! oh, I wish you hadn't!" was all she said, trembling, for a man's blood lay at her door.

"I am glad—glad! You cannot say no now!"

"Sir Thomas, I must always say no"; and stooping, she unfastened his fierce, impotent grasp, and drew him to his feet.

"And I know why you say no, O daughter of the gods!" he cried with a savagery that startled her.

"Why?" she asked, stiffening.

"Because," he answered bitterly, "to you my love is only ridiculous. You cannot marry a man whose head barely reaches your shoulder,

who is weakly, a miserable, broken failure. You are conscious only of the ridiculous; I only of the love. There are no two points of view more opposite. The lover standing on a footstool to kiss his beloved! What is that but sheer farce—it's only the lover sees the tragedy. That kiss would be sacred to me, but you . . . there would be the hidden laugh, shame—contempt. It would be so very absurd. And so the more my heart breaks for love of you, the more am I ridiculous."

"Ah, no, Sir Thomas, never that. I want you to be brave and manly and big, in the true sense of the word, and accept my no."

"And Lascelles—what about Lascelles?" he cried in a tortured voice. "Is he, too, to accept your no?"

"Captain Lascelles can never be anything to me," she said, turning white.

He looked at her strangely; then he took up his hat. "As long as you keep to that I will let you alone, but not a moment after. If I cannot have you, no one else shall. My hands are already red; it will not matter to make them a little redder."

"You would kill him?"

"No—you!"

"Ah!" She drew her breath sharply with relief.

His face twitched. "You love him!" he flung at her. "Lies are useless between us—you love him! But keep your word and save your life. A dead bride would avail him little."

He went out of the room without another word, and Prue sank down on the sofa, covering her eyes with her hands, trembling violently. Though Jim Lascelles was henceforth her enemy, the thought of him lying somewhere face down, a bullet through his back, had turned her heart to water.

She was still very white when Mrs. Stanley danced in. "Oh, here you are!" that lady exclaimed. "Prue, I'm in such a fix. Only you can help me. You will, won't you?"

"Of course! Doesn't the new dress fit, and shall I let the waist out?" For Mrs. Stanley imagined herself considerably slimmer than she was, and would never allow her dressmaker to make the waist over a certain size on principle—and then altered it at home. It was a harmless fiction that took in nobody—the dressmaker least of all.

"Oh, I've done that, and it's a great success.

No, dear, it's Bob Chorley; he's coming by this boat, and will be here on Thursday afternoon——”

“What! the man from the bush?”

“Yes; and oh, dear! I have a feeling he'll be dreadfully weird, and I shall be out, and I knew you'd be alone that afternoon, and thought——”

“Oh, I will entertain him, if that is all. Leave a note to explain.” And so it was settled.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Thursday afternoon came, Mrs. Stanley told Miss Trevor and Jane, who were to accompany her on her expedition, they must be ready by three.

Then she bustled into Prue's dainty drawing-room in her newest dress and a great state of suppressed excitement. She contemplated the unconscious victim of her plot with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and wished she might be present in spirit at the forthcoming comedy.

"You won't forget about Bob Chorley, will you, dear?" she enquired, buttoning—with difficulty—her tight gloves. Like the majority of women whose hands are not as small as they could wish, she erroneously believed wearing tight gloves decreased the apparent size of her hands.

"The primitive?" exclaimed Prue with interest. "I am looking forward to meeting him most awfully. It's quite too dear of you to

leave him all to me. You little know how I hanker after a new type of man. One gets tired of the sane and the same."

She broke off, biting her lips, for Sir Thomas was scarcely sane, and in her heart she did not believe Jim Lascelles belonged to the usual.

"They are too civilised," she went on. "When they get annoyed with somebody they drag him into court, instead of round the walls of the city by the scruff of his neck, or smiting him lustily. Civilisation can be overdone; in the end it will protect us so carefully we shall never learn to protect ourselves, and weakness and inefficiency will come of it. Now, the primitive has carried his life in his hand, and consequently finds it more worth while to live. I suppose he will greet us with a coo-ee, and act generally à la melodrama—at least, I hope so. I hope he wears clothes, not door-mats and things—at least, I will *try* to hope so for respectability's sake. In his letters to you he always signed himself 'your awful aboriginal cousin,' and if he isn't I sha'n't ask him to come again. What sort of a bachelor is he? Partly or wholly married, I mean. Is he the sort that's 'left a lot of little things behind him,'

and a squaw or begum, or whatever you call 'em?"

Mrs. Stanley flirted her dress round and giggled. "Naughty girl!" she exclaimed in her high voice. "I don't suppose he's as uncivilised as all that. Probably he could make love to his fellow-squatters' wives——"

"I like your morality!" laughed Prue.

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Stanley with another giggle, "of course I meant strictly platonic affairs. A great thing for keeping young men straight. I assure you, if it hadn't been for me, several of the fresh and frisky subs in our regiment wouldn't have been half so particular."

"I'm sure they wouldn't," agreed Prue, with a twinkle in her eye. Mrs. Stanley had been, and still was, a flighty, flirty, rather foolish, but quite harmless, woman.

"My husband never minded; he cared for nothing but the regiment, and would have sacrificed me any day to it. He was rather a trying man, my husband, and I've often thought the best part of marriage was widowhood. One couldn't always remember it was his liver——"

"You should have taken liver tonics and soothers," yawned Prue. "I suppose I must go and attire myself for the primitive. Have

you any glass beads and things? How shall I dress—or otherwise—to make him feel most at home? Like the squaw, you know? Will it be *comme il faut* to ask after her and the squallites, or to ignore the subject à la St. John's Wood?"

"Wear that golden crêpe-de-chine, the colour of your eyes."

A shadow deepened the golden eyes to brown. Jim Lascelles had liked that dress best of all her afternoon frocks. But Jim Lascelles, to all intents and purposes, was dead, and why should a lovely frock be put away because one man had failed?

So she wore the crêpe-de-chine, which she had paid for out of her bridge winnings, and dressed her wonderful hair as she had dressed it for the lover who had passed out of her life; then she sat and waited for the man from the bush.

It was close on four when the whirr of the lift sounded, and she had just time to rush to the quaint, old mirror in the corner—which men, if they thought anything about it, supposed was there entirely for ornament—and change the position of the flowers she wore.

"How pale I am!" she frowned, and pinched

her cheeks furiously. Then she sank into a chair with her back to the door, and became deep in her book. She would not look expectant even over that *rara avis*, a primitive.

Footsteps came from the lift towards the door; at sound of them her breath caught, and the pinched cheeks no longer remained pink. Waking or sleeping, living or dead—so she told herself in a burst of passion—she would know that tread among all the millions of men.

She could not, would not, face him; a sleepless night had left her weak, and though she feared not him nor any man living, she feared—most horribly—herself.

There was no exit save by the door, and she would meet him. She must let him come, and then without a word she would walk out of the room and lock herself in her own.

She had flung the book down and stood up very white and stiff when there came Martha's knock, and, to Prue's utter astonishment, "*Mr. Chorley*" was the name announced.

At sight of the truly awful apparition that entered she could hardly control a hysterical laugh, so great was her relief. This fearful, hairy, flaming person smart, well-groomed,

handsome Jim? What strange tricks fancy plays!

"I am as big a fool as other women, after all," she thought furiously. Then she looked at him again, and her mouth twitched suddenly, whether in mirth or pain it would be difficult to say, but mirth was at least permissible, for Jim Lascelles, in his desire to disguise himself beyond possible recognition, had decidedly overdone matters. He had gone to a man who made up characters for the stage, and asked to be made as like a man from the utter wilds as possible. He also insisted on a quantity of red hair, and to be made quite unrecognisable. The man had enquired if it was a matter of a farce, and Jim had thought it better to say it was.

The maker-up not unnaturally supposed the young officer was taking part in a burlesque, and made him up accordingly.

When Lascelles studied the complete effect in the glass he gasped. One thing at least was certain: his own mother would not have known him—or probably wanted to!

For he beheld a great, burly, slouchy man in loud clothes, with big, clumsy boots several sizes too large, and a leonine head covered with

long, thick, flaming hair. In fact, what with bushy whiskers, dyed moustache, and thick beard, the man from the bush was all hair. Great, red eyebrows changed the appearance of his eyes. He certainly would not have known himself.

"Is it necessary to be so very hideous?" he had asked, dismayed. How, he wondered, could Prue be expected to show an interest in such a horror?

"I could trim you up a bit, sir, but the disguise would not be as complete."

So Jim reluctantly left matters as they were.

Among the many things he feared as he entered the pretty room, recognition was not one of them, but though his voice had been artificially changed, his eyes looked at the girl he loved in the same eager way, and when he pulled off his gloves he revealed hands which could in no way be associated with the bush, while the black, oval mole on the right knuckles, always noticeable, was now none the less so.

And Prue's eyes being always keen, and made keener by love, knew him the instant their glances met, which was perhaps the reason of

that curious twitch of the mouth, which might denote pain or humour or even malice.

She saw the plot in an instant; she also saw the easiest way of punishing it. Jim had indeed delivered himself into her hands. If it had been anyone else she would have found the situation a delicious comedy, but comedy was far from her heart, even if it lay in her eyes.

She advanced towards him with a smile of radiant welcome. "You got Mrs. Stanley's note?" she asked. "She was so sorry to have to go to-day of *all* days. I feel such a poor substitute, but I am awfully interested in bush life, and perhaps you will put up with me for want of your cousin. She said she was a distant cousin, but I forgot to ask whether she meant distant by blood or liking—or merely water. I have so longed to know a real, primitive man. One gets so bored with the correct, inane creatures who go by that name. And, oh! do you know, I've got all the ingredients for a damper, and please will you make one? It won't be a bit like an ordinary, horrid, afternoon call."

Jim gave a little gasp. This was Prue all over; always disconcerting. He had thought his disguise would carry him through his part

all right; he had forgotten about learning it. A horrible fear that she would ask him questions about his life in the bush, and he would betray his ignorance, came over him. She would never forgive such a ridiculous masquerade unless her feelings for him suddenly softened.

"I could not make such a messy concoction in a lady's drawing-room," he managed to stammer, "and you—you roast it in ashes in the sun, you know."

"You mean bake, don't you?" sweetly. "At least, you don't roast cakes in England—except by accident."

"We always roast 'em in Australia," he said firmly. "That's why it's so nice to leave it all behind. The thought of an English tea-table seems too good to be true. It's awfully kind of you to ask me like this."

"Won't you sit down?" and she pointed to a chair full in the light. He complied, fidgetting uneasily. His hair felt very hot and very false; the light was intensely strong, and her eyes were keen as they were merciless. He sat there silent and flushing, looking very uncomfortable.

"I'm afraid you feel shy," said Prue cruelly;

"but you mustn't, you know; no one ever is with me. Dear me! you remind me of someone."

Jim gave a guilty start, and laughed uneasily. "Oh, I'm sure I'm not like anyone," he burst out in a panic.


"Are you as unique as all that?"

He was saved from answering by the appearance of tea. He drew his chair a little out of the too strong light, and nearer Prue.

It was worth while making such a ghastly fright of oneself to be near her again, since that was the only way. To be in the same room was like the home-coming of a man lost in the desert. And now he was "Mrs. Stanley's cousin" he would be able to see Miss Maunsell often; so that till the time came when he should somehow make her forgive him he was not to be deprived of her company. Yes, he was glad he had consented to the plot; though once more he wished vehemently he had been made less hideous.

"How pleased you look!" said Prue, meeting his eyes. "I suppose it's the thought of an English tea."

"And you as hostess to pour it out," he said incautiously.



1. The first group of variables, *demographic*, includes age, sex, and education. The second group, *attitudinal*, includes attitudes toward the environment, attitudes toward the government, and attitudes toward the military. The third group, *political*, includes political participation, political trust, and political tolerance. The fourth group, *economic*, includes economic satisfaction, economic freedom, and economic development. The fifth group, *cultural*, includes cultural participation, cultural tolerance, and cultural development. The sixth group, *social*, includes social participation, social tolerance, and social development. The seventh group, *environmental*, includes environmental participation, environmental tolerance, and environmental development. The eighth group, *political*, includes political participation, political trust, and political tolerance. The ninth group, *economic*, includes economic satisfaction, economic freedom, and economic development. The tenth group, *cultural*, includes cultural participation, cultural tolerance, and cultural development. The eleventh group, *social*, includes social participation, social tolerance, and social development. The twelfth group, *environmental*, includes environmental participation, environmental tolerance, and environmental development.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DO hereby certify that
JOHN W. BROWN
is a member of the
Society of the Sons of the American Revolution
and that he is entitled to the
privileges and immunities of such member.

"I don't know," he said with a laugh
which was partly betrayed him had other
things on his mind. "They are quite a
good lot, all my every blessed things; they
come like a flock of birds and when they've flown
away all the vegetation has gone phut!"

"So the rabbits fly in clouds!" wondered
 Prince Legality, pouring out another cup of

tea. "How awfully interesting! You should write a book about it."

"I meant the locusts," he said, getting warm.

"And what do the squaws wear?" she asked innocently. "It's quite a hot climate, isn't it? But *how* hot?"

"Beads!" desperately.

"Oh, Mr. Chorley! you don't mean that's all?" she exclaimed rising, deeply shocked. "Oh, how *can* you be so dreadful?"

"Oh, dear, no! of course not!" he cried quickly. "Beads are just their ornaments; they have the—er—usual amount of clothes."

"That's a great comfort to me," said Prue, relieved. Then her face fell and she sighed: "Nothing is ever what you think it—not even the primitives, it seems. It must seem strange to come back to England, home and beauty—or is it duty? I suppose you are musical or literary or something?"

"Why do you suppose that?" he exclaimed with dismayed indignation.

"Your hair," she answered with awful frankness; "it seemed the only explanation. Won't you have it cut?"

He thought of what the maker-up had said.

"The English climate is very trying," he

growled. "I shall catch cold if I do. And I wore it longer in the bush."

"In one pigtail or two? And tied up with pink and blue ribbons on alternate days, and white on Sundays because you were Orthodox? How quite too delightful!"

He glared at her suspiciously. "Now you're making fun!" he said shortly.

"I always do. Do you mind?"

"Suppose I do?"

"Then the remedy is easy. It shall cease."

"Your making fun?" relieved.

"No; your coming here again."

"Oh!"

"You see," she found it necessary to explain, "I'm quite different from other women. I neither mind what I say or do. I am just—me. If they don't like it they can lump it and go away; it's all one to me. So now you know. Of course, some people make mistakes; they think because I'm called Improper Prue, I *am*! When they find out their mistake it's too late to be of any use."

The man from the bush turned the colour of his hair.

"It amuses me to see the foolish tumble into their own ditches," went on the girl in her slow

drawl. "Another acquaintance gone! But as I have no use for that sort, it doesn't matter to me. There are always *les autres*. I tell you so that you may understand, because, not having been civilised for so long, you might make mistakes, too. And I never forgive those kind of mistakes."

"Don't you?" said the unhappy Jim gruffly, as he stooped to pick a non-existent pin from the floor, his very forehead crimson. "I—I sha'n't make that mistake," he muttered.

"Because you know too much of the real thing?" she enquired carelessly.

He gasped.

"Don't trouble to contradict."

"I assure you——" getting heated.

"Oh, *please* don't! The unknown is always the most interesting. I'll ask Austin."

"Who is Austin?" He spoke rather sharply.

She put her head on one side, drooping her lids. "Austin is my Toby-boy," she said absurdly. "He's a sort of cousin. The nice sort, you know; near enough to be proper, but distant enough to be interesting—like you and Mrs. Stanley. An excellent invention—cousinship!"

"So it seems," he agreed with affected light-

ness, his eyes savage. She had never mentioned Austin before, and the ones unmentioned are not necessarily the ones that don't count.

He felt the ordeal was becoming too great, and rose unwillingly.

"Must you go? But you will come again to see . . . Mrs. Stanley?"

"Little flirt!" he muttered to himself between set teeth. A woman that flirted with such an object as himself would flirt with anything and everything on earth. He was almost sorry he had come. If he was unhappy away from her, he was almost unhappier in her presence. The whole thing was sickening, and it would have been a great relief to have smashed the furniture and shaken Prue.

"I might interfere with the visits of Mr. Toby Austin," he growled.

"Oh, no; for of course if he came I could send you away."

"You are too . . . considerate."

"You sound quite as if you would not go."

"I meant to convey I should not come," he said haughtily.

"In that case I will say good-bye and *not* au revoir. So interested about the flying fauna!" and she held out her hand.

The man from the bush bit his lip till it bled, then in a very humble voice he said: "It would be awfully kind of you if you would let me come now and then. I am quite a stranger in town."

"And a primitive!" she added thoughtfully. "How cramping you must find civilisation! I suppose you want to fight people and cleave them to the bone when they annoy you, and spring up in the air in Piccadilly, and utter war-whoops and tomahawks and things?"

"No," he said rather shortly; "I don't."

Her face fell. "But I was so interested because you were primitive."

"Then I *am* primitive," he owned with an unwilling sigh.

"Really and truly? How lovely! And you will do some before you go?" eagerly; "some primitiveness, I mean?"

He gazed at her helplessly.

"Such as a war-whoop," she insinuated. "How high can you jump? Please do some, or I sha'n't ask you to tea again."

So the unhappy man from the bush jumped ungainly till his head nearly hit the ceiling, and made weird noises in his throat.

"Is that all?" she sighed. "Or are you a little out of practice? I don't think I should fly if I were they; I should stay and show you how to do it."

"If you were what?" despairingly.

"The other primitives—the enemy—you know. What a lot of jujubes you must have to eat after being so—so awfully primitive! Is that why your voice is so rough?"

"No," said the sorely tried man curtly; "I've had—er—tonsillitis."

"In your legs? And is that why you jumped so spraggly?"

The hand of the man from the bush clenched fiercely upon his hat, but he said nothing.

Prue was not surprised when the brim went.

"Of course, you're not accustomed to hats," she said sweetly, as she rang for Martha to show him to the lift. "How banal they must seem after pigtails and pink ribbons!"

The man from the bush still kept silence, but he got hurriedly out of the door, and stumbled down the three steps to the lift.

"Damn it!" he said to himself in a fury; "but she's just the limit!" And after he had gone, Prue waltzed round the room and laughed and

laughed till she was breathless, an unwonted shrillness in her laughter.

“What a comedy!” she cried. “Heavens, what a comedy!”

But though the tears of mirth were on her cheeks, there was no laughter in her eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

"AND what did you think of my cousin?" demanded Mrs. Stanley in a tone Prue mentally designated as being so natural that it was almost unnatural. "What is he like to look at?"

Prue rested her chin on her hands and considered carefully. "I am trying to think how best to describe him," she said, feeling a malicious satisfaction in the knowledge that Mrs. Stanley was on tenter-hooks. How dare she plot with Jim Lascelles against her!

"I can only liken him to Moses in the burning bush," she said at length, her Scriptural facts vague as ever. "It's all burning bush and no Moses. His nose and forehead are human; the rest is a scarlet hair-mat."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Stanley, throwing up her hands. "I never thought he would change as much as all that. He used to be a handsome man."

"You must not ask me to believe that, but

as long as one is not required to go about with him or introduce him to one's friends——”

“Oh, dear!” Mrs. Stanley said again.

“I never promised to do that, you know. It would be awful to have crowds following. I noticed he went away in a cab. He would not boil a billy or bake a damper, but he did other primitive things, such as war-whooping when I asked . . . it was very interesting! You might lend him to me again. He says the fauna is mostly flying; even rabbits—it seems—fly in the bush.”

“Bother the man!” escaped the exasperated Mrs. Stanley, for it occurred to her, not only that Jim had overdressed his part, but that he was playing it very badly.

She decided she would coach him a little before he saw Prue again. He called on her two days later, and when he came into the room she shrieked and dropped into a chair with closed eyes.

“For the moment I thought you were the de—the dustman!” she explained hurriedly. “Oh, Captain Lascelles, whatever made you exaggerate so? And now she’s seen you, you’ll have to keep it up. Surely you could have done with less hair. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I wouldn’t

have believed you could have disguised yourself so much."

"It's no good crying over spilt milk," he said gloomily. "Anyway," cheering up, "no one would know me."

"No, I suppose not"; and she looked at him with sudden doubt. "It's only because I *do* know it's you that I recognise you by your eyes. You can't disguise your eyes, Captain Lascelles." She gazed into them admiringly.

"I suppose there's no chance of her coming here this afternoon?" he remarked casually.

Mrs. Stanley tossed her head and frowned. "There was a time when a man could endure my company for five seconds," she said, offended. Then her face cleared, and she laughed and rang the bell. "I'll ask her to bring her party up here to tea to meet you," she said, and the message was sent.

An acceptance was returned, and Prue, followed by Jane, Jenny Trevor and Colonel Wylde, came in a little later.

Jane Thompson looked hard at the bushman, and got quickly to another end of the room after the introductions had been gone through, and Miss Trevor made an instinctive movement nearer Colonel Wylde.

The colonel himself screwed his glass into his eye and stared intently at the freak for some seconds; then he said in a voice which was not as inaudible as he supposed: "*An Australian bushranger! My God!*"

There was a moment's awkward pause, then Mrs. Stanley rustled over to Jane Thompson, Colonel Wylde drew closer to Jenny in the window-seat, and Prue was left in undisputed possession of the *rara avis*.

The poor bushman rather lacked cordial welcome, for Jane Thompson kept her back towards him the whole time, while Colonel Wylde eyed him with ever-increasing aversion, his replies to his neighbour's questions becoming so disjointed that, holding her proud head a little more erect than usual, a hot flush on her cheek, Jenny left him to his own devices and joined Prue in entertaining the Colonial.

She had never shown to better advantage, and Colonel Wylde looked from her to the bushman with strained attention. Nothing escaped him—except the truth. Even a mole, the counterpart of Lascelles', was noted merely as a curiosity; it was strange two men should have exactly the same mark in the same place—and two such opposite men!

"So this is the fellow, is it?" his thoughts ran; this rich barbarian was to be offered to Jenny Trevor! And how ready she was to be sacrificed! How absurd of Miss Maunsell to imply that she might refuse the suitor when found! If she could swallow that monstrosity she could swallow anything. She was like her mother, after all. As for Mrs. Stanley, he knew and loathed the type. Such women were the delight of the vapid subalterns, and the annoyance of their husbands in every Indian station. He wasn't going to help her (he did not refer to Mrs. Stanley) to get married—not he! She didn't want much help, it seemed, if she could make a dead set at a chap like that, first go-off. Serve her right if she failed and had to live with the apostle and his bride for the rest of her days!

"What the devil she asked me to tea for, I don't know!" he demanded in one of his famous asides. *"Left easy-chair at the club for women's cackle! Damn-fool!"*

And then, unconscious of the fact that Mrs. Stanley was listening to his comments in offended majesty, he went over to Prue and held out his hand.

"So sorry, but I have an appointment at four-thirty," he said gruffly.

"Do make him give you gas," Prue said earnestly. "Believe me, it is never painless without, whatever they say."

"I'm not going to the dentist," coldly.

"Oh, I'm glad. I thought you looked as if you were. Don't forget you're booked for to-morrow night for bridge."

He made no reply; but shaking hands with Mrs. Stanley, and bowing to the rest of the party, and especially haughtily to Jenny Trevor to mark his lordly displeasure, he stalked to the door.

Prue muttered an excuse to her hostess, and caught him up as he was about to ring for the lift.

"You haven't said about to-morrow night," she remarked; "and I must know because of the numbers."

"Is that—that *bush*—person coming?" he asked stiffly, beginning to brush his hat with his sleeve.

"Yes; and Mr. Hargraves and young Stanley—four men, four ladies. I thought we'd have two tables. You and Miss Trevor against Mr. Chorley and ~~me~~" *Prue*

"Is that the bushranger's name?"

"Yes; when he's been home longer and got his hair trimmed and new clothes he will look quite different."

"Let us hope so! Why didn't he stay in the bush?"

"My dear Colonel Wylde! Anyway, he's made a fortune and come home to settle down——"

"And marry?"

"And marry."

"The sort of thing he *would* do—ugh! Well, I wish your plan every success. I'm sure it's most suitable in every way, but I scarcely think you will need my assistance. I imagine Miss Trevor is more competent in the matter than either of us thought."

Prue stooped suddenly and adjusted the buckle of her shoe. "Now, if I'd been stout I should have broken what are called the 'busks' of my stays," she said inconsequently. "Don't marry a stout wife; it comes too expensive."

"*I* marry!" exclaimed the colonel in amaze. "I thought everybody knew I was a confirmed bachelor, and have been for twenty years. I marry! God forbid! But to return to the subject we were discussing——"

"Yes, to return to it——" echoed Prue softly.

"I hope Miss Trevor will be successful in escaping the *ménage* of the apostle, and that some day I shall see the bushman in a less untrimmed state."

"How clever you are! You saw how things were at once, and that it was a case of first-sight on his side. Not that I wonder very much, for Jenny is really more than taking when one knows her, and she looked splendid this afternoon; but, you see, I cannot do without the assistance you promised. He's awfully rich, the very husband for her, but I'm afraid she mayn't see it. I want you to be at hand to help me persuade her take him when he proposes. After all, kind hearts are more than coronets, and Jenny is apt to judge a little too much from externals."

"A man with feet like that!" snorted the old bachelor, "has missed his vocation. He ought to be a policeman. Excuse my vulgar humour, but I was reading the usual 'comic' paper before I came, and that was one of the usual 'jokes'; it seemed too apt to be missed."

"Then you'll come to bridge and help me?"

"Delighted!" he said undelightedly; "but

you must not sacrifice Miss Trevor by giving her me for a partner. Let the gentleman from the bush have the honour of trumping her ace—he looks as if he would.”

“You are quite brilliant this afternoon——”

“Spiteful!” snapped the colonel. “Bad as a woman! I’ve taken a dislike to the feller. Always had a prejudice against the unwashed and uncombed.”

“Miss Trevor will soon change all that,” remarked Prue confidently. “As for trumping her ace, I believe he plays quite well.”

“Hum! sort of desperado; has a dozen aces up his sleeve, and a loaded six-shooter in his pocket! He’s like the penny dreadfuls I read as a boy, come to life. Are you sure his credentials are quite genuine?”

“Mrs. Stanley vouches for him.”

“Mrs. Stanley is a fool.”

“Colonel Wylde, you are quite too dreadfully . . . frank! She is my friend.”

“Sorry,” he said ambiguously, and departed hurriedly as the lift came up.

“Well, what do you think of Mr. Chorley, my only-Jane?” asked Prue with a yawn, a little later, when she and her party were once more in her own flat.

"I try not to think of him," said Jane with a hurried, nervous laugh, and changed the subject.

"He reminds you of a nightmare, or 'the morning after' sort of thing?"

"Yes—oh, dreadful!" agreed Jane in flurried tones. "Do come here, Prue; there's a man going to be run over by a motor-'bus."

Prue flew to the open window and craned her graceful neck. "There!—he's just dodged it in time!" she exclaimed, disgusted. "They always do, and so you might learn by experience, Miss Thompson."

"I really thought it had got him that time," said Jane regretfully. "Oh! I don't mean that! I should hate anyone to be hurt, but, of course, if he *had* to be run over, one might just as well see it; these flats are so handy for that sort of thing—I mean having him brought in and mended up again——"

"And then married to the mender," said Prue thoughtfully. "Like a novel, or the stage. Surely here's an opening for a progressive superfluous woman—professional mender and comforter, etc. Shall we submit our credentials?"

"Dear me! there's the dinner-gong, and Mrs.

Stanley can't bear to be kept waiting!" and Jane fled hurriedly.

Prue took a seat nearer Jenny. "By the bye," she said in a tone of long-suffering boredom, "I want your help."

"It would be nice to think you could," said Jenny wistfully. "How proud I would be to give it!"

"Well, you can; Mrs. Stanley has pushed the responsibility of Moses in the burning bush—I call him Moses because there isn't any, but only bush—on to me, and I've got to help to entertain and civilise the creature. Now, if you would be nice to him, find something he is interested in to talk about, and take him off my hands a little——"

"The subject of interest would not be hard to find, or far to seek," laughed Jenny, patting her friend's knee. "She came; she saw; she conquered—as usual. Have you ever known a man who did not succumb—either with encouragement or without?"

"Don't be silly. Lots! A man now and then, of course, takes a fancy for a while, but that happens to everybody——"

"It hasn't happened to me," said Jenny with rather a rueful shrug.

"How do you know? There's always a future——"

"At thirty-four?"

"At forty-four, if you're the right sort."

"My dear, for you there would be a dozen at fifty-four, for age could not wither you, nor custom stale your infinite variety, but I belong to the herd——"

"Then belong to it no longer. To browse with the herd is to get what they leave over. One must seek a new pasture, even trespass a little if necessary, and annex the private grazing ground of the fatted calf. We started on the subject of love—now we've got to calves! How very appropriate! By the bye, Colonel Wylde wouldn't regard me with a matrimonial eye if I went on my knees to him, and Toby says 'no!'"

A painful flush rose to Jenny's forehead, and she turned her head sharply away. "A man who dislikes women as Colonel Wylde——"

"As he *thinks* he does," corrected Prue. "Bless him! dear, blind old stupid! Will you and the bush play he and I to-morrow night? Then Tom Stanley and Jane can have Mrs. Stanley and Toby for opponents. We can change after three rubbers. And promise me

to be perfectly sweet to the Australian, and wear that pale-rose dress."

"Of course," said Jenny readily. "But I—I'd rather not play at the same table as Colonel Wylde. He looked at me just as he looks at mother this afternoon, and it made me angry. I might be rude."

"Well, be rude," grinned Prue; "the ruder the better. Why should you let him class you as the herd? Stop browsing and bite his legs——"

"How absurd you are!" laughed Jenny, blushing. "I suppose you are too light-hearted ever to be serious! You are a sort of perpetual champagne."

"There's nothing flatter than stale champagne," returned Prue, making a grimace, "and one cannot always bubble and froth and sparkle. A clown may be racked with toothache, but he's got to wear the motley just the same." Her smile was a little bitter as she turned away.

Jenny flung her arms round her neck. "My beautiful, lovely, darling Prue!" she cried passionately. "There can never be a sore heart for you; it would be too wicked. You were born under a lucky star, and all the planets vie with

each other to cast the best gifts into your lap. You've only to stretch out your hand to take all you want—wealth, position, love, friendship! Why, women have won a throne with less than your beauty—your fascination. You must marry a duke, Prue, and he must be a king among men as well. What a pity Captain Lascelles has three lives between him and the strawberry leaves!”

Prue stiffened at once. “If he were three times a duke, he would still be nothing to me,” she said.

“But he’s madly in love with you. I never saw a man so much in love.”

“He may have thought himself in love . . . once, but that is all over. He insulted me—never mind how—and he is no longer among my acquaintances. Come, we have barely time to dress, and we are to make ourselves as conspicuous as a music hall to-night with Mrs. Stanley and her man from Barnum’s. You’ll sit on his other side, won’t you? I suppose we’ll have to explain all the ‘humour’ to him; a man from the wilds is likely to be somewhat puzzled.”

Jenny did her best, though the attitude of the Australian puzzled her, for he seemed as

bored as if he had seen a dozen such performances, and indifferent to everything save his nearness to Prue.

And while Miss Trevor talked and laughed with her neighbour, a middle-aged, military-looking gentleman in the stalls regarded her severely through his eyeglass.

CHAPTER XIX

COLONEL WYLDE was the last to arrive for bridge, and his appearance was more aloof than ever.

It did not, however, overawe Prue, who drew him aside as soon as possible. "I'm so glad you've come," she said sweetly. "I'm just awfully worried, and I don't know what to do. Perhaps you can suggest something. You see, both Austin Hargraves, my kinsman, and the Australian want to play with Miss Trevor, and though the Australian is the richest, Toby—as I call Austin—is the most presentable to look at, and all that. He's close on fifty, too, and it's time he was married. The bushman is barely forty-five, and mayn't want to tie himself up straight off without a good fling round first, though he's awfully taken with her, as no doubt you can see. Which do you think I had better cast the vote for?"

Colonel Wylde played with his eyeglass, and

finally said coldly: "I should leave it to her. Does she prefer money or respectability?"

"She's such a dear, unmercenary creature, clings to her ideals, and the idea of love and respect and 'frills' of that sort. Otherwise she'd have been married long ago with her attractions. She looks up to you so much I'm sure if you were to put in a word for one or the other——"

"I will endeavour to act the grandfather to the best of my ability"; and he screwed his glass firmly in his eye. "I suppose it had better be the squatter—she can have him brushed and shaved and all the rest of it, but nothing could remove the severe respectability of your cousin's mouth."

"Oh, thank you! I knew I could depend upon you. We'll manage it between us, won't we?"

"There seems every likelihood of it," returned the colonel with rather forced enthusiasm.

He noticed that Jenny, who was partner with Mr. Chorley against Prue and himself, was decidedly nervous and played badly.

"*Just as well I wasn't her partner!*" he muttered in an "aside."

The Australian, who seemed somewhat sulky, did not play very well either, and Colonel Wylde and his hostess easily won the three rubbers. The victors retired to the alcove, and two pairs of eyes followed with pained distress.

"He is beginning to succumb like the rest," thought one.

"She can't bear the sight of me—and no wonder!" thought the other.

"Isn't it tiresome of Moses getting the sulks like this?" Prue demanded plaintively of her fellow-conspirator; "and through such an absurd notion!"

"What's wrong?"

"He is jealous of you. Did you ever hear anything so absurd?"

The colonel's glass fell out of his eye, and he gave vent to a strong expression of amaze. "But why the devil——" he began.

"Oh, she thinks so much of you, and doesn't hide it, I suppose, and of course she can't help looking down on *him*!"

"But it's so—so absolutely ridiculous and unfounded!" stammered Colonel Wylde, going dusky red. "Why—why, I'm old enough to be her father."

"Hardly; say an elder brother. Oh, it is trying when girls will be so romantic!"

"But she wants the Australian feller, surely?"

He jerked his eyeglass angrily.

"She knows she *ought* to want him, that it's too good a chance to throw away, but—well, there you are! I'm going to speak to her and see what can be done, and you must be ready to back me up."

"Of course! of course!" hastily.

Then the conspirators returned to the others, and Miss Trevor began all at once to make rather feverish conversation with Mr. Chorley, and he—his angry eyes on Prue—seconded her efforts.

A little later Prue managed to draw Jenny aside while refreshments were being put on the dining-table. "Did you ever see such an awful wet blanket as Toby and Moses?" she asked impatiently. "They're as cross as two sticks, and played vilely."

"Because they are desolate without you," said Jenny with an effort at lightness. "You know they are both your victims."

"Good gracious! don't suggest such horrors!

I wouldn't marry them if it were ever so. Would you?"

"Oh, *no!*"

"I mean if they were in love with you instead of me, and asked you to-morrow, would you have one of them?"

"Not for anything!" said Jenny.

"I thought you would say that. Oh, dear! Martha has forgotten the claret-cup! Will you pour out the coffee, and I'll see to the rest?"

The young hostess, radiant with good spirits, sparkling and merry, pressed refreshments on her guests with many sallies of wit.

"It's plain she never cared at all," thought Jim Lascelles, who would have bitten his moustache if the dye hadn't tasted so vile.

"She's a bigger flirt than ever since she's come from Malden Court," thought Mr. Hargraves, tightening his thin lips. "That wild-buffalo beast, and staring colonel are the latest. It's time someone put a stop to it."

"There is nobody who would look at her and not love her," thought Jenny, and tried to be glad.

Prue found the opportunity she wanted for a few low words with Colonel Wylde. "It's worse than I thought," she said despairingly.

"She *absolutely* refuses to have either if they propose. She was most emphatic when I pointed out the right course to her. I can do no more; you must try and influence her. She's got to marry somebody, and you and I must see to it. If the worst comes to the worst, as you've encouraged me to guarantee a husband, you must ask her yourself!" and she laughed as if she did not mean it.

Colonel Wylde started, stuttered, and then subsided with his face very pink. "She—she must take one of them!" he said in a panic.

"She won't; and when she says she won't—she won't. That's Jenny all over. Bother romance! bother ideals! You must do something with her. You promised, and I rely on you. But of course you must swear never to breathe a word, under any circumstances whatever, of what I have said to you. Probably she will pretend they are in love with *me*. Women are so sly!"

"I should hardly consider Miss Trevor sly," returned the colonel in a tone of rebuke.

"No; I wish she was. Sly women get married, and I mean to make her marry somebody. Some man has got to have the luck, and she shall not be sacrificed to that professional

matrimonialist any longer. We shall not start bridge again at once. Get her into the alcove and have a sensible talk, but remember what I've said. You must never hint I let the cat out of the bag. Let her see you have made observations for yourself."

Colonel Wylde looked to where Mr. Chorley spoke earnestly to Miss Trevor. "It's obvious enough," he said, "and I certainly consider she has given him encouragement. I will see what I can do."

"Then it's as good as settled," she returned.

"You are more . . . optimistic than I," he answered doubtfully, playing hard with his glass, but he moved over to Jenny, and a little later he manœuvred her into the cosy alcove, which it is to be feared many of Prue's admirers knew by heart.

Jenny set her lips, her face pale and strained to endurance. She had been listening to one lover descant on the perfections of Prue, now it seemed she was to go through that part again, and the only man who had ever counted was to be the enthusiast.

Colonel Wylde, too, looked unusually pale. He felt the difficulties of his task, which was

far from a pleasant one, and he was so nervous his pulses jerked unevenly.

The little rose-coloured lamp in the alcove shone on Jenny in her rose-coloured gown, making her look strangely young, and very fair and sweet.

"Damn it! she's too good for the feller!" he thought aloud, and Jenny, who was accustomed to his uncomfortable habit, set her teeth.

So it was coming! He was jealous of the Australian!

"You do not think Mr. Chorley good enough?" she asked coldly.

"What—why—I don't understand!" he stammered. "I want to—to have a talk with you about this—this affair. It must either be he or Hargraves, I understand——"

"Not necessarily," she said icily. "Where there are two, there is usually a third."

"A *third!*" he gasped. "Are women never satisfied? Who is the third, may I ask?"

"And who should ask less than yourself?" she returned steadily, her meaning unmistakable. "Pardon me for saying so, but you showed your . . . jealousy very plainly."

Colonel Wylde made a sound like a gurgle in his throat, and his hand shook as he tried in

vain to fix his glass. "Well, you're a cool hand!" he gasped at length. "Expect me to come to heel, too, do you? Me, a confirmed bachelor this twenty years! But I'll see myself——"

"It's not what I expect, but what she expects, that matters," said Miss Trevor very coldly. "You have shown her quite plainly you resented other claims on her attentions——"

"Shown *who*?" shouted the colonel. "Are you all mad? Good God! you don't mean to imply that Mrs. Stanley expects me to propose to her, do you? Me a confir——"

"You know perfectly well I was talking of Prue all the time," said Jenny, beginning to lose her temper. "If a man hasn't the courage of his—his affections, he's a poor sort, and not worth any woman——"

"Prue! Prue Maunsell! Why, I'm as fond of that girl as a father; but what's that got to do with the Australian and——"

"Are you going to deny you are put out because he paid her attentions?"

"Paid *who* attentions? Look here, bluff's all very well, and Prue said you'd play this sort of game—no, hang it! I mean she said . . .

she thought well of Chorley, but it's *you* I was talking about."

A sudden flame leapt into the girl's eyes, and his own grew alert with admiration. There was no gainsaying the beauty of Jenny's eyes at such moments.

"Am I understand you are taking it upon yourself to criticise my conduct?" she demanded in tones that should have warned him. "I should be obliged if you would kindly state what you have brought me here to say, and be as brief and coherent as possible."

The poor colonel gasped helplessly. "Why are you so angry?" he asked, amazed. "I thought we were friends. I wanted everything to happen for the best. The chap is rich, and if he were shaved a bit might make a fairly presentable husband, and you have flirted with him and encouraged him enough, goodness knows. As for being jealous of him——" He broke off, his face turning a deep, dark red. "Well, I thought it a bit rough, old friends being shunted so quickly," he owned with an effort, "but I would have given you a handsome wedding-present, and hoped for your happiness——"

"I think I am beginning to understand a little," said Miss Trevor in a voice that cut like a knife. "You are not mad—only very impertinent."

"I thought you wanted to be married," he burst out, beginning to perspire. "I thought all girls did!"

"I am no longer a girl. I am thirty-four——"

"I thought they wanted it all the more *then*," the blunderer continued; "but I'm sorry if I've offended you."

"You have not offended me. You have only made yourself ridiculous."

"I'll never try and help a woman to get a husband again!"

"*Help—a woman—to get—a husband!*" repeated the exasperated Jenny. "How *dare* you say such a thing! And of me, to me! How dare you offer to 'help' me to another woman's leavings!"

"Good God! here's a pretty mess! Why do you persist in that old farce? The man is obviously in love with you, not that I blame him, mind. And you are enraged with me about it. I thought you were good-tempered."

"Oh, I was a worm. I still am. But I turn when trod upon."

"I tread on you! I, who only want you to be happy, and was afraid the feller wasn't good enough——"

"You are too kind! But anyone is good enough for me. Any senile, doddering old idiot——"

"Senile! *doddering*! I won't be called——"

"You applied the words to yourself—I didn't."

"Anyone might think I was an old grandfather——"

Jenny broke into a stinging laugh. "A man of fifty can be a grandfather if he marries young enough," she retorted.

"Well, I didn't; but I'm as good as a grandfather in your eyes, all the same, it seems. Fifty isn't second childhood, madam; it's often a man's prime—whatever it may be for a woman. But I've had a lesson: a confirmed old bachelor only makes a fool of himself when he interferes in—in such matters. I sha'n't do it again."

"I sincerely trust you won't," turning away.

"I mean interfere," quickly.

"I meant . . . the other thing."

"I will not be called ridiculous by any woman——"

"Again you applied the term to yourself"; and with a shrug she left the irate colonel biting his lips.

CHAPTER XX

"WHY!" exclaimed Prue innocently, gazing at Jenny's face of haughty displeasure, "surely you and Colonel Wylde have not fallen out? I thought you were such friends! I suppose he's been saying something unusually tactless, or thinking aloud to your embarrassment."

"He has been most interfering and impertinent," returned Jenny.

"Old bachelors *are* stupid and wanting in vision, aren't they?" insinuated Prue.

"They oughtn't to be allowed," assented the smarting Jenny.

"But I should ignore the quarrel when next you meet. He is rather an old dear, really."

"I don't think I care for old dears, then," sniffed Jenny, and went and sat down by the Australian. She asked him an absent question or so. Gazing fixedly at Prue, who had joined Colonel Wylde on the balcony, the young man neither heard nor heeded, and neither of the

preoccupied couple noticed the omission. They sat together in silence, busied in their own disturbing thoughts, and Colonel Wylde glared at them angrily.

"When it comes to sitting mum and glum, one knows it's a bad case," he thought aloud.

"Oh, you mean Mr. Chorley?" said Prue's soft, sweet voice at his elbow.

He started a little. "Did I think aloud? Dear me, I must cure myself of the habit. I might sometimes say something awkward. Yes, I was alluding to the—er—wild beast show." His teeth clicked sharply with satisfaction. He had never been able to understand the pleasure of saying ill-natured things. Now he did.

"For shame! My poor, dear Moses! And you have bungled the matter with Jenny awfully. She is ever so cross——"

"She did not hide that fact from me. She was very rude indeed."

"You must forgive her; no doubt she thinks old bachelors a little stupid——"

"She said so?" quickly.

"You mustn't ask such leading questions. Perhaps you said something about women she did not like."

"I only said they all wanted to get married," he growled, "and that the older they got the worse they wanted it. That's true enough, isn't it?"

"Truth is rather a hard missile sometimes. Now, you must ignore your little wrangle, and meet as if nothing had happened."

"She tried to make out he was gone on *you*," continued the colonel indignantly. "I suppose she thought because I was an old bachelor I couldn't distinguish black from white——"

"She's so modest; she may really try and imagine I am the attraction."

"Nonsense! She'd no business to tell me I was making a fool of myself, and other equally unpleasant things."

"And you *weren't*? Yes, it was rude, but she owed to me you had not been very nice to her, so suppose we bury the hatchet and let things go on as they were. You were going to take the two of us to the pictures and tea at your club. That will make a trio, and three is an immoral number——"

His face darkened. "I won't have the circus," he said firmly. "People would think I had taken to going about with a musical celebrity."

"Poor Mr. Chorley! and he's quite a respectable man. You could ask young Stanley to amuse me, and then you and Jenny can return to your old footing."

"I don't think things can ever be the same again. I regard her so differently now. I tell you frankly she worries me. She never used to worry me."

"I see what you mean. The thought of her is always cropping up?"

"Yes, yes," unsuspiciously. "Can't get the girl out of my head."

"Why, you're as bad as Mr. Chorley," said Prue playfully.

Colonel Wylde stared after her and pondered. Then he flung away his cigarette and rejoined the party in the drawing-room.

Jim Lascelles, more in love than ever, cursed his masquerade for the hundredth time. Prue alternately flirted with him and snubbed him, and the thought that she could amuse herself with the character he was supposed to be was more than he could endure at times. And yet he had caught glimpses of another side of her, fondly believed that he only of all the world knew her for what she was.

That she should flirt with Colonel Wylde of

all people was the last straw, to say nothing of treating that prim relative of hers with such flippant familiarity. He winced even more than Hargraves himself at the sound of her careless "Toby."

And there was young Stanley and a dozen others!

Sir Thomas Larchmonte came as often as he dared, and Jim guessed he proposed frequently.

He watched the desire of his heart say good-bye to Colonel Wylde and young Stanley, who left together, noticed that the confirmed bachelor only had a distant bow for Jenny Trevor, whose friend he once had been, and that he held Prue's hand a long time and spoke earnestly to her in a low voice. He caught the words "picture-gallery" and "Friday," and guessed an appointment was being made.

The Australian looked at that moment no more primitive than he felt. Then Miss Thompson, who seemed to dislike him, went to her room after barely touching his hand in farewell.

"I make even *her* sick!" he thought, disgusted. "The only one who treats me as if I was human is Jenny Trevor."

Prue was drifting past him at that moment, and he managed to detain her, gain a few precious words from her. She was very sweet and gracious, but her eyes were cold and cruel when once they met his, where love for her burned like a flame.

He rose to depart, feeling that for every foot of ground won he had lost two.

"She knows I am in love with her," he thought as he walked home, "and sometimes the fact amuses her sufficiently for her to pretend an interest in me, flirt with me, play with me; but usually she is only bored, and thinks I've no end of cheek, and when I look at the object I've made of myself, I think so too."

He brushed up against a passing pedestrian and apologised.

"I wonder she lets me come so often," he thought, and perhaps it was as well he did not guess she was only using him as a stepping-stone to the affairs of Jenny Trevor.

As he waited for a stream of traffic to pass at Piccadilly Circus, he found himself by the side of Colonel Wylde.

As Jim Lascelles he had liked Wylde; now his feelings were changed. He gave the curtest

of nods. It was returned in an even curter fashion if possible.

"Making a fool of himself at his age!" thought the angry masquerader.

"Thinking she will jump at him because he's rich—the bounder!" muttered the colonel, passing on.

The ~~Tate~~ Gallery was strangely deserted, and the few who were there stared as much at the very smart quartette as at the pictures.

"This sort of thing makes one feel like a cousin up from the country," said Prue. "I was one myself once, but never again, please the pigs! Let's go into this room, Mr. Stanley. Jenny and I are at variance in our ideas of art." And the delighted youth helped her to lose the other two with alacrity.

The combatants had met very stiffly, and though they had been perfectly polite, it was more the politeness of an armed truce than any other.

Left alone, however, matters grew a little better, and in their fervour over a certain favourite picture they became almost friendly. Colonel Wylde looked rather more at his companion than at the pictures, and Prue decided

that the new hat and dress she had chosen justified the extravagance.

"The idea of her bein' thrown to the feller!" thought the colonel. *"Like the Christians to the lions!"*

Jenny affected not to hear, her face flushing. But she knew who was meant *this* time.

"I'm sorry I was unable to ask Chorley," said Colonel Wylde resentfully, "but Miss Prue suggested Stanley as a fourth. To be honest, I hate being conspicuous with a bush-ranger."

Jenny's pretty eyes fell demurely, while a sudden sense of well-being made her face glow.

"I dare say he's quite a nice man, in spite of his looks," she said cleverly.

And the colonel beamed.

"Sensible girl! Jolly sight too good for him! But he's very rich, isn't he?" he demanded in his usual tones.

"I have never felt sufficiently interested to enquire."

"Don't you like a feller to be rich?"

"I like or dislike the *man*; his circumstances are merely an incident."

"And I," said the colonel, playing nervously with his eyeglass and going very red, "like a

—a girl for what she is, so we ought to agree, oughtn't we?"

"Certainly."

"Then we're friends again? I'm so glad. The other thing made me feel quite put out. I was always worrying about you, don't you know."

"Were you, really?"

"It quite got on my mind. Now I can be comfortable again. We can make up jolly little parties like this and have a good time—eh?"

"It will, of course, depend upon Prue."

"And you won't want to drag the solicitor person or the bushranger along, will you?"

"Why do you dislike Mr. Hargraves?" asked Jenny. "And why should I want him to come?"

"Oh, I just thought you might," and he reddened, "and that he might want to come, too, don't you know."

"You have rather odd thoughts!" said Jenny coldly.

CHAPTER XXI

PRUE was having a moral "spring cleaning," and not liking all the dusty corners she came across. "I must make a clean sweep of it all," she told herself despondently, her lovely face tired and pale. For she had been asking herself a question and not liking the answer. Was she a hypocrite? She knew she was. She had been seeing a great deal of the Australian lately, flirting with him at times in a quite outrageous manner, but snubbing him severely when he presumed on her conduct, and she knew she had not really let him come altogether to "help on Jenny."

He could only hinder, not help, Jenny's affairs now, which were progressing entirely to the satisfaction of Miss Maunsell, and now that she had no further use for him, the sooner he was dismissed the better.

The farce should come to an end the very next time he appeared. She drew nearer the tea-table and poured herself out another cup

of tea. Jenny, chaperoned by Mrs. Stanley, was out with Colonel Wylde, who took her somewhere each day, and for once the beauty was alone.

A frown crossed her forehead as a quick, firm tread came towards the door, and Mr. Chorley, after a brief tap, entered. She had been to blame for allowing this, but there should be no more of it.

"Mrs. Stanley was out," he said apologetically, "and so I ventured to hope you might give me tea."

"Tea is so cold," said Prue inhospitably, "and Martha has gone out for the afternoon to see her niece——"

"I would drink worse than cold tea from your hands and think it nectar," he said in a low voice.

She poured some tea into another cup. "I hope you will drink your portion to the dregs," she said, looking at him strangely.

He took the cup and put it down; then he caught her hand and kissed it.

"I worship you!" he said fiercely. "I would die for you——"

"I wish you would!" she said flippantly, gazing hard at his livid hair.

"You always mock and laugh at me! You have no heart! I would do anything in the world for you——"

"Then why not cut your hair as a preliminary?"

"How can you trifle at such a time?" he demanded huskily. "Is nothing sacred to you?"

"Why should your hair be sacred?"

"Damn my hair—oh! I beg your pardon; but——"

"Just what I felt about your hair from the first!" she said coolly; "but I thought you might not like *me* to say it. Thank you for doing so!"

He was on a low chair by her side, and, uttering a word of protest at her trifling, he caught at her hand, but she eluded his grasp, and instead laid her fingers ruthlessly upon his head.

They slipped over his hair—gripped it! There was a sharp twitch, an exclamation, and the hairy appendages of the man from the bush were suspended in Prue's slim fingers, leaving Jim Lascelles' cropped, dark head exposed to view.

She dropped the hair and stood up. "I think you had better go, Captain Lascelles," she said,

"*Prue!*" he gasped, half glad, half fearful, the masquerade was at an end. "Then you *knew?*"

"From the first; but I thought the comedy might amuse me for a little. It's no longer new or entertaining, and so the curtain comes down. I am waiting for you to go, and take your rubbish with you."

"You call my love rubbish?"

"No; your hair—ornaments. The other went into the dust-heap long ago."

"Oh, Prue! Surely you——"

"Must I ring for the porter?"

"You've been playing with me like a cat with a mouse——"

"A silly, little dead mouse, that no longer affords any fun."

"It would have been more merciful to strike sooner. Your claws haven't left very much of me, Miss Maunsell."

"When a thing is worthless, the less there is of it the better."

"Hasn't my punishment endured long enough? Have mercy! I don't defend myself. I deserve it all—more! I am at your feet. Will you keep your thumb forever turned down? As you are strong, be merciful!"

"If you are tired, so am I, and the remedy is easy. Never let me see you again. Marry someone else."

He jumped to his feet, his face dark, and strode to the door. "Will you come to my wedding?" he flung over his shoulder.

"Delighted!"

"Then you shall—and soon!" he exclaimed between set teeth.

"There's nothing like marriage for improving young men," she said sweetly. Then she added with a flash of suppressed anger: "And I hope your wife will put the fear of the Lord into you!"

"Ay, she'll do that!" he snapped, and went out, slamming the door.

"At last I've got rid of him!" she thought, and stared at the red wig at her feet.

Suddenly the door opened again and Jim was upon her, had caught her fiercely by the shoulders, and wheeled her round to face him. He bent down till their faces almost touched, and glared into her eyes. "Damn your pride!" he said thickly; "it is spoiling both our lives—yours as well as mine, for you could love me if you would—if you don't already!"

Prue turned very white, half closing her

eyes. "Let me go!" she managed to say. "Do you think I want the bruises of your fingers *twice?*"

He let her go at once, and stepped back. "What a brute I am!" he cried, all contrition in a minute. "Have I hurt you, dear?"

"Be good enough to go!"

"I can't eat or sleep for thinking of you——"

"Love-sick!" She shrugged her shoulders, laughing unpleasantly. "Well, you *were* rather like a calf with all that red hair! So you want to act the lover! Well, why not? Lady Charlton has a vacancy just now. She and Major Bourne have finally parted, making a virtue of . . . satiety. She is now ready to be wooed and won all over again—by a fresh lover. Applicants are advised to apply early to avoid disappointment, with references from their last place. No sandy man need apply—her husband is sandy. She——"

"How dare you make a jest of such——"

"How immaculate you must have been to affect such virtuous indignation, O excellent young man!"

"Prue, don't! I hate the thought of other women, though I swear there have been very,

few in my life, that I can offer you a cleaner past than many; still, I am not fit to tie your shoe-strings——”

“A duty one scarcely asks of . . . Sir Galahad!”

“Don’t call me that,” he said in a low voice. “I have only fought a little, that is all, and won—a losing fight——”

“Don’t let us make paradoxes, or discuss your morals; they may interest your future wife, but they do not amuse me. It is the good as often as the wicked who are the ones to crush out our ideals——”

“If I had not failed you then, if it had not been for that cursed mistake, should I have had a chance? Answer me that.”

“Yes,” she said slowly; “you might have won me if you had not lost irrevocably first.”

“Then you care a little! You could not be so hard if you did not care. I have learnt that about women. And you think I will let you ruin both our lives!”

“It is so obvious I am hopelessly in love with you!”

“I should be so proud of a tiny piece of your love——”

“And I so ashamed of yours!” she retorted.

"And now, since you can afford me no more amusement as a burlesque bushranger, perhaps you will go, and understand I am not at home to you in the future."

"Then you are afraid of me!" triumphantly.

She turned on him with flashing eyes.

"Explain!"

"If you were sure of yourself—indifferent—it would be nothing to you whether I came or went."

Her hands clenched. "Come as any other acquaintance and call in common with others," she cried through set teeth; "but I certainly shall not receive you when I am alone, for—to be frank—you bore me; stupidity is so common that it palls. Take your chance at finding me 'receiving' if you like."

"Thank you," he said quietly, leaving the room. "I shall do that."

At the foot of the stairs to the lift, he paused, starting joyfully. He turned quickly, his face changed, for Prue's voice called him. She was going to relent!

Then something furry struck him between the eyes.

"You left the—the appendages," she said politely. Then came the final slam of her door.

CHAPTER XXII

JIM picked up the wig with an oath.

As he stood with it in his hands, his face dark, Jane's door opened, and she came towards the lift dressed for the street.

She gave a little jump at sight of him. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed, staring at the hair; "then she has found you out?"

He pushed the thing into his pocket, and scowled. "She knew all the time," he returned.

"So did I!", said Jane. "So would anybody with half an eye. I could have told you that wasn't the way to soften her."

"One might as well talk of softening granite—what would?"

"Nothing short of your death or fatal injury now. Then she'd come round, of course."

"Oh, of course!" he sneered, in a shocking temper. "And a damned lot of good that would be."

"Oh, hush! I meant *nearly* killed."

"Shall I fall off the roof of Mammoth Mansions for her entertainment?"

"No; but you might try falling under a motor-'bus. One can see it all from her window. But they always just escape."

"And how am I to be certain of getting out of the way of the blasted thing in time?"

"Oh, Captain Lascelles, how dull you are! Of course you wouldn't. But it would only go over a little bit of you."

"The head 'bit,' for choice, I suppose? Then she could be 'sorry' over the carcass! How like a woman!"

Jane sighed hopelessly. "Well, if you are so—so nervous of yourself, couldn't you pretend to be dying and send and tell her so?"

"*Nervous of myself!*" he echoed, enraged.

"It could be malignant influenza," said Jane vaguely; "it is a very sudden thing. You could be dying in no time."

"Thanks, Miss Thompson, your ideas are most helpful and encouraging, but I don't care for half measures. Why not let me send a line to say I'm dead, but 'it's of no consequence, thank you'?"

"Oh, you *are* cross! Why not do something heroic, then? Save an old man from being

run over, or a baby from a burning house, and let her read about it in the paper? You could send in the account yourself and get interviewed."

"And get run over, also, I suppose!" he scoffed. "Besides," he added brutally, as he thought of Sir Peter and his ilk, "I don't like old men—I'd gladly shove some of 'em under; and there are far too many babies in the world already."

"You are a coward and a brute, and quite unworthy of Prue!" exclaimed the indignant Jane; "and I'm sorry I tried to help you. There are crowds of nice men wanting to marry her, and——"

"I'd run off with her rather than let 'em."

"You're very selfish, and care for nothing or nobody but yourself! If you loved her the right way you would put her happiness first."

"No one could make her as happy as I could, and she knows it—the obstinate, little madam! There'd never be a shadow in her life once I was her husband."

"Except the husband!" retorted Jane.

"That's too smart to be your own," he said offensively; "you're imitating *her*!" and he looked his opinion of such desecration.

"I mayn't be clever," said Jane, with a toss of her head, "but I've common sense, thank goodness!"

"Prue doesn't require anything so common as common sense—bless her!" said Prue's lover grandiloquently. "Would you hitch a waggon to a star?"

"*Idiot!*" burst from the exasperated Jane, thoroughly disgusted with the pair of them. They had only to reach out their hands to secure happiness, while others were straining all their lives and never touched it.

"I want her, and I mean to have her!"

"So do at least a dozen others; and they care for *her* happiness!"

"*Damn you!*" Then he caught at her hand. "Forgive me! For God's sake, don't turn against me, too! I was half mad—but you kicked a poor devil when he was down. Prue——"

"I'm getting a bit sick of Prue!" burst out Jane suddenly, between set teeth, her sallow face flushing, her dull eyes dark with passion.

"I'm sick *for* her!"

"And we're both fools!" retorted Jane brusquely, ringing for the lift.

"Thank you for quarrelling with me," he

said meekly; "it has done me good. I felt like murder. Do advise me; you know my little girl——"

"Your 'little girl' overtops ninety-nine women out of a hundred," snorted Jane, who was a little tired of sentiment, and most of all of the wilful unhappiness of a very fortunate couple; also, though she was barely five feet herself, no one had ever alluded to her thus.

"But there must be something I can do to help matters," he said desperately. "Oh, suggest something quickly. Here's the lift coming up."

"Much good my suggesting anything! If you'd any sense you'd go away for a while and let her miss you. Then come back and call informally as if nothing had happened—and wait your opportunity."

"It's a stiff dose!" making a face of dismay.

"Then don't take it. Throw away the medicine, hug the disease, and blame the doctor!"

"But I am going to take it, even though the remedy is nearly as bad as the complaint. There is something in what you say, I do believe!"

"There usually is!" retorted Jane roughly. "I don't dwell in the clouds."

CHAPTER XXIII

"So CAPTAIN LASCELLES has got a month's leave and is yachting with the Duke of Towersleigh and his two sons in the Menai Straits, is he?" muttered Prue, putting down the paper, "and that is why he has not been here since that absurd masquerade. His ducal relations have gone to his head, no doubt, and Mammoth Buildings, under the circumstances, are low. Well, if he's any sense he'll drown the duke and the dukelets some dark night, and come home rejoicing with the strawberry leaves wound round his brow."

"And offer them to you?" suggested Jenny gaily, trying on a new hat before the antique mirror. "You're right, mauve *is* my colour. But, Prue, doesn't this glass flatter? I don't look a bit like what I was a few months ago."

"Are you?"

"No, I'm not; and you're the good fairy who has made Cinderella into a passable person."

"Why not the fairy princess—with the prince? Wear mauve for your going-away dress."

Jenny blushed scarlet. "Don't be absurd! As if I shall marry at my age!"

"Oh, no! you wouldn't think of it, would you? Besides, you are wasting your time letting a confirmed old bachelor monopolise you, when you ought to be acting like that motor there—pursuing the reluctant males!"

"But, you know, you say yourself it never catches 'em; besides," hotly, "nobody could call Colonel Wylde old—he is in his prime."

"Are you going to suggest he is not a *confirmed* bachelor, after all?"

"I think I'd better try that hat before my own glass," said Jenny hastily, bolting with hot cheeks from the room; "it may be a bit rude, but it's nearer the truth than this one, I think."

Prue's smile followed her. "Well, it's nearly pulled off," she thought.

At that moment Colonel Wylde was announced.

He cast his eyes hurriedly round the room in search for the one woman, and his face fell.

Prue shook hands with him very gravely to

hide her secret mirth, and he told her he had two tickets for the horse show.

"I thought perhaps you or Miss Trevor would honour me with your company," he said, avoiding her eyes guiltily. "I am sorry I could not possibly get a third ticket."

"How kind of you," said Prue with a malicious twinkle in her eyes. "I should like it of all things. I must see if I can possibly squeeze it in." And, while the unhappy colonel looked his dismay, she affected to consult her engagement book.

"I'm afraid it will have to be Jenny, after all," sighed Prue at length, "if you don't really mind very much. Of course, if you do, I might——"

"I don't," said the colonel, far too quick for politeness. "I assure you I don't at all. I'm sorry you can't come. By the bye, where's the Australian? I haven't seen him for ages."

He was not in the secret.

"I fancy he was told he need not call for orders any longer."

"But the Hargrave feller still comes?"

"He is coming this evening. Be sure you bring Jenny back in time not to miss his visit."

"Of course," he returned very readily, hav-

ing made up his mind to miss his rival at any cost.

"By the bye," he added a little hurriedly, "you are looking very much off-colour. I hope you're not in for influenza, or anything——"

"Infectious? It's not contagious if it's taken in time," she returned sarcastically. "And I could isolate myself, you know."

He turned pink. "As if I meant that for a moment!" he exclaimed untruthfully, adding to himself, as he supposed: "*Can't have Jenny run any risk.* Is she in?" he asked aloud.

"I must be growing very plain," said Miss Maunsell plaintively, "since a man cannot put up with me for two minutes!"

"How absurd!" he said uneasily. "As if you were not more lovely than ever—almost the loveliest girl in the world! And I've been here quite a long time."

"Thank you!" said Prue, putting on her air of offended majesty. "And it's a 'long time,' isn't it? And I'm an 'almost,' it seems! That it should come to this! Toby and the Australian also consider I am but as moonlight unto the sunlight, but you—— Prithee, what has Sunlight that I haven't?"

He laughed awkwardly. "Perhaps it's her

blue eyes," he suggested. "Some fellers are so keen on blue eyes."

"So it seems!" and she tossed her head. "But blue eyes are common as dirt and mean coldness and inconsistency, but golden ones are rare and glorious and wonderful, and mean all manner of delightful things."

Colonel Wylde eyed his glass intently. "I do not think Miss Trevor is cold or inconsistent," he said stiffly.

Prue shrugged her shoulders and felt her nose carefully. "Poor, dear, little thing; you're out of joint!" she said. "Now about a chaperone——"

"I couldn't get a third ticket!" he persisted.

"But do you think you *ought*?"

"Ought what?" but he avoided her eyes.

"I don't mean go unchaperoned—though, of course, you'll get awfully compromised after being thought a woman-hater—but spoil her chances as you are doing. Keeping off desirable husbands, you know. Sometimes I'm afraid you forget our bargain. We were to get her suitably married between us, and now that the bushranger is shelved my poor Toby-ums ought to be given a chance. He is really such a very respectable man, and honest and

obliging, and all that—so suitable in a husband. His character is immaculate, and his income rapidly increasing. You could let him have your business and mention him to your friends——”

“Tout for the feller! Good God! he’s too respectable to be endured; he fairly stinks in the nostrils! Surely there’s a medium between a family solicitor and the Mormon mother!”

“You should say Morwoman,” corrected Prue, narrowly regarding the heated visitor; “but if you are always monopolising Jenny like this, our mutual plans won’t have a chance. Besides, people will think you are the favoured suitor——”

“You never take anything seriously,” he said, flurried.

Then Jenny came shyly into the room, and he greeted her eagerly, thinking how desirable she was. “By Jove! suppose some other feller——” And he turned pale instead of pink.

Jenny gladly accepted the invitation, and they went off together like any boy and girl in the springtime of youth and love.

They were quite unconscious of Prue’s displeasure, which was due to a little jealousy, for, for them the path of happiness lay so clear

ahead, and they were too dense to see it. It was enough to make anyone feel jarred and angry, thought Prue.

In fact, they very ungratefully forgot the *deus ex machina* altogether, like the rest of the world. They found the horses beautiful, viewed together, and enjoyed everything like the children they had suddenly become by the grace of Cupid.

They did not object to the drive back in the dusk, either—though it was rather a tight fit in the hansom, and once, when the horse was drawn up sharply, the girl was flung against the man quite heavily. Annoying as it must have been, neither showed irritation. Instead, the colonel slipped his arm round Jenny's waist. "You mustn't fall out," he explained, "and we're coming to rather a sharp turn." It was probably respect for his years that made the girl refrain from objecting to this liberty.

Suddenly exhilarating fire ran through the colonel's veins, and he drew the girl close. Never had he felt less like an old bachelor. He did not feel in the least old, and still less like a confirmed bachelor.

"Jenny!" he said quickly. "By gad! I've

been a blind old fool. Is it too late? Will you have me—dear?”

Jenny turned a radiant face quickly aside, but her body trembled under his close grip.

“Am I too old?” he asked indistinctly.

“Oh, *no!*”

“Then, dear little girl, will you be my wife? We are such friends, we’re bound to make a success of matrimony, and I’m awfully fond of you. We both know ourselves, our own minds. We’re not intoxicated with passion and ripe for any folly. Will you have me, Jenny?”

“Please, I should like it very much,” she stammered rather absurdly.

“Then that’s settled!” he exclaimed with a sigh of relief. “By gad! to think I’ve not only proposed to a woman, but been accepted!” Then he bent and kissed her.

At the corner of the second deserted street he kissed her again. “By Jove! it is a rum state of affairs, isn’t it?” he exclaimed.

Jenny laughed with shy happiness.

“I suppose I proposed very crudely, eh?” he enquired diffidently; “not having any practice, you know. Did you think me an awful old ass? The Australian, now, or Hargraves——”

“The Australian would of course say ‘my

wife or your life!" jested Jenny, hiding her eyes from his ardent gaze; "and probably Mr. Hargraves would have a correct legal proposal typed and sent round by the office-boy. But it's nothing to me, you know, and—and I thought you did it splendidly."

He beamed. "That's all right, then!" he said heartily.

"Only you are such a *parti*!" she sighed.

"Well, you've got a rich husband," he returned with a grin, "and what more can any woman want?" He pressed her fingers. "I should have found you one sooner or later, you know. Prue and I were agreed to that. Only somehow none of the fellers seemed quite up to the mark—by Jove! this *will* amaze her! Upset her calculations a bit too, eh?" There was a look of comical embarrassment upon his face.

Its counterpart shone on Jenny's. She knew Prue would not be altogether amazed, and certainly not displeased.

"Oh, there's mother and Peter!" she exclaimed, trying to shrink out of view, but too late, for the couple had seen them and stopped their carriage.

"Let's get it over," said Colonel Wylde reluctantly.

"Like the dentist!" Jenny could not help saying in a weak giggle.

Lady Trevor stared and asked him to repeat his amazing intelligence, and an awful fear came over poor Jenny that she was going to ask Peter to witness the announcement, or the colonel to sign the declaration and "put it in black and white."

But that ordeal was spared her; the accomplished matrimonialist grasped the delightful truth, and kissed her daughter warmly.

"Thank Heaven, my dear," she managed to say in a whisper neither of the men could hear. "You have some of my brains, after all, if nature has been less kind. Why, he's one of the biggest catches loose, and given up by the cleverest, and you will be in an awfully exclusive set. How *did* you do it?"

"I will tell you—for next time," laughed Jenny, patting her mother's shoulder and drawing back, recking little there was to be no "next time," but that in a few short months Lady Trevor would be lying dead, a mangled heap, in the house where four husbands had come, and three departed.

CHAPTER XXIV

JENNY went straight to her room on her return, and Colonel Wylde, looking absurdly boyish and bashful, sought Prue to tell her the great news. It never dawned upon him that she saw it in his face as soon as he entered the room, or that she heaved a little sigh of relief. "One bark safely steered to port!" she said to herself, and the simile made her think unwillingly for a moment of a yacht lying off Beaumaris pier.

Then in a vision she seemed to see a dark, stormy night, the Penmon lighthouse, where she had climbed as a small child, and the Penmon rocks very clear and pitiless. There was a vivid flash of lightning, and a yacht, rudderless, was swept before the storm, her sails torn, a mast broken! . . . Then came the terrible tearing crash, a cry of dismay, and sudden, horrible silence. . . . And the silence was so much the worst of all.

As suddenly as it had come, the vision

passed, and Colonel Wylde sat in her pretty drawing-room, staring at her curiously.

"Are you ill? Are you going to faint?" he asked. His voice seemed to come from a long way off, and again a turbulent sea sounded in her ears.

She flung up her arms like a man drowning—for a drowning, agonised face had looked at her. "Oh, God! oh, God!" she cried wildly.

Colonel Wylde dashed into the dining-room, and pouring out a glass of brandy and water, forced the greater portion down the trembling girl's throat.

"If you think it's influenza beginning," he said anxiously, "I can take Jenny straight off to my cousin, Lady March. I've thought you looked suspicious for some time."

Prue thrust his hand away with a hysterical laugh. "Quite half of the stuff has soaked my dress," she said unsteadily. "Now, if it had been a man instinct would have seen to it that it went inside rather than out. Wish you had seen to it also, for I'd prefer intoxication to a ruined new frock. Oh, you stupid men! It's not influenza. I'll get a doctor to give me a certificate to that effect if you like. It is the heat."

"But it is distinctly cold."

"I know; I meant the sudden cold; anyway, an atmospheric condition, perhaps a slight earthquake or storm——"

"Or the terrible thunder-storm and gale they had off the coast of Anglesey, working this way."

"There was nothing about it in the morning's papers," she said after a long pause, and her voice shook slightly.

"No; it was in the afternoon edition. Great damage done, but no particulars. The life-boat was out, but they got the men off the steamer——"

"Where was that?" Her face had gone quite grey.

"Some miles from Penmon. You know the place a little, don't you?"

"As a child I stayed there two summers with my uncle and aunt; on the last occasion we had a tiny yacht for the season."

"Lascelles is yachting round there with the Duke of Towersleigh. I suppose you don't know when he's expected back?"

"How should I know?" she returned very coldly.

"Where is Jenny?" she asked a moment

later. "Surely you didn't lose her, or did you meet Toby and let the poor man have his in-nings?"

"No—er—she came back with me. By the bye, Miss Prue, I'm afraid you will be rather annoyed, but I've got a piece of special news for you. You will be amazed. It's something you could never guess. What would astonish you more than anything?"

"To hear you were going to be married," she managed to say lightly.

He gave a little jump. "There's many a true word spoken in jest—I am," he owned. "Guess who to?"

"I can hardly believe the evidence of my ears. Is Mrs. Stanley the vic—I mean the happy one?"

He frowned. "Certainly not! I should never marry that type of woman. She doesn't want a husband at any cost——"

"But you said she was going to marry you," interrupted Prue. "You are not very logical. Why is she marrying you if she doesn't want you?"

"Because I want her, and—and we're good chums, and—er—awfully fond of each other, and all that," he muttered incoherently. "It's

Jenny Trevor, and I say, Miss Prue, you won't be annoyed with me for upsetting all your little plots and plans, will you?"

"I'll try not to," the girl answered drily, after she had affected the proper amount of surprise, "but it's rather disappointing. However, I'll make the best of it. Call her and let me congratulate the pair of you."

Jenny, looking almost lovely, came into the room with a shy little laugh, but her eyes did not meet Prue's. Colonel Wylde drew her hand within his arm, and looked down on her rather idiotically, his face ridiculously boyish. "I've broken the news," he said, "and Prue will give us her blessing, after all. But she thinks we're very naughty, deceitful children not to let her guess."

"Oh, yes—yes!" murmured Prue mechanically, her eyes on a paper-boy a long way off, her ears strained to hear what he was calling out in the midst of ceaseless noise.

Jenny flung her arms round her friend. "Dear, I owe it all to you," she whispered brokenly. "Do you think I don't *know*? I shall never forget. My lovely, generous Prue!"

"What is that boy calling?" was all the reply Prue made, her voice strained, her lips

quite white. "Look! there is some great excitement. The papers will be all gone before he gets here!" She leaned farther out of the window.

"I'll go and get one," said Colonel Wylde, jumping up. "Perhaps the bill has been rejected by the House, after all."

"What are you afraid of?" Jenny's arms tightened on the other girl's shoulders. "Why do you look like that? What do you think——"

"I do not think, I *know*," returned Prue in a tone of hopeless finality. "The world has fallen, that is all. I have seen it. Only the paper contains the thing in black and white—listen, you can hear better now. What is the boy calling out?"

"A duke drowned! Wreck of a yacht off Penmon! The three next heirs lost!" repeated Jenny mechanically; then she turned with a cry. "Oh, Prue! Prue! it's the Duke of Towersleigh and his sons, and Jim Lascelles was with them! Oh, Prue, darling, don't say it matters like *that*! You swore he was nothing to you."

"He was everything, everything—this world and the next!" burst from Prue in a great, tortured cry.

She staggered to the door, pushing aside the other's clinging arms. "Let me go," she cried indistinctly. "I must be alone——"

"Here is Charles with the paper," said Jenny. "Perhaps there is some hope—the bodies may not have been found——"

Prue turned quickly and sank down on the window seat, her back to the room. "Remember, he must guess nothing," she said fiercely. "Make him tell you everything, and then get him away."

Colonel Wylde's face was very grave, and he looked at the two women without speaking.

"We heard what the boy said. Has anyone escaped?" demanded Jenny.

"There seems no hope," said the colonel heavily. "I knew Towersleigh well, and his boys. He was a fine chap, the elder son the same, the younger a good-for-nothing, I always thought; but it's Lascelles I'm thinking about; there was no finer chap than Lascelles."

"Has his body been found?"

"They have found four bodies together; it is supposed they are the three Towersleighs and Lascelles——"

"*Supposed?*"

He looked away. "They—they are badly

cut by the rocks," he answered, clearing his throat. "Some of the crew have been washed up, but others are missing as yet. The yacht was caught in the sudden gale, and dashed straight on the Penmon rocks——"

"Can nothing be done to make—sure?" faltered Jenny, casting a fearful look at Prue's rigid back.

"I am going down at once," he said, folding the paper. "I telephoned my man to meet me at the station before I came up. I would know any of them anywhere, I feel sure, and Lascelles' height——"

"Go now—at once!" said Jenny feverishly. "I cannot help feeling he must have escaped. Only find him and bring him back."

She returned to find the sitting-room empty, and her heart ached as she thought of her friend's agony behind locked doors. If it had been Charles Wylde lying there by the rocks!

She gave a great cry and fell face downwards on the couch, biting into the cushions.

Jenny got up unsteadily and stole past Prue's door, within which might lie a corpse—as perhaps there did indeed lie the corpse of life—holding her breath because the silence

seemed so tense with voiceless agony, and knocked at Jane Thompson's flat.

She entered without waiting for an answer, and here was tragedy again, for Jane was haggard and yellow, and looked hideous in her grief.

Jenny began to cry softly. "Everybody liked him; he was so brave, so good, so manly!" she sobbed.

Jane looked out of the window, her face twitching, her eyes hard and tearless. Her grief was hardest of all to bear, for two agonies racked her, her own as well as Prue's—and Prue at least had a right to grieve for the man who had loved her.

"God is very cruel!" she said at length fiercely, her faith in this bitter moment breaking away, not comforting.

"Oh, God!" echoed Jenny impatiently. "What has He to do with *human* things? What is He outside the churches? And yet, He has been good to me, for I have not trusted in Him, yet has He given me my heart's desire."

She raised her face, looking dreamily at the spinster. "What is the answer?" she asked. "I deserved nothing, yet I have all; and Prue,

who deserves all, has nothing. Why should she be cast down and I exalted? What is the answer, Jane?"

The Nonconformist spinster still stared unseeing in front of her. "I don't know, and I don't care," she said between set teeth. "All answers are but other questions. What does it all matter? What does anything matter but Prue and that dead man?"

"What will become of her? Will she go mad, kill herself, die of a broken heart?"

"People don't do that sort of thing," said Jane shortly. "They only live on to find the hours a weariness, the days a penance. The door of life shuts down—that is all—but only the fortunate die."

"I wonder if Colonel Wylde will—will recognise him? I cannot help hoping there is some mistake. He promised to telegraph first thing in the morning. He can only get as far as Chester by train to-night, but he has a cousin at the barracks with a fast motor and has telegraphed him. It will meet the train, I expect."

The motor and man did, as Jenny supposed, meet the Chester train. "I can take you as fast as you like, sir; the roads are good part of the way," said the chauffeur.

"Then drive like hell!" said the colonel briefly, scrambling in. The car leapt forward, and they were off.

That wild dash through scented moonlight night was not easily forgotten. The colonel sat bending forward, clutching his hat, and urging the man to a still more reckless speed.

After they crossed Menai bridge the roads were rougher, more winding. They hummed down the Menai road, where the trees, grim in the moonlight, revealed glimpses of peaceful, silvery waters on the right, and hills over which brooded a great peace; through Beaumaris, level and smooth as to road, the little town asleep; up the hill to Fryars road, past the house on the left, looking on to the straits, and then the next instant, seemingly, by the vicarage. And now they were not far from the scene of tragedy; they were slowing down the narrow, dangerous road, where only one vehicle could pass, and there was a big drop on to the beach on the right. On and on and on! And the moonlight died, and a grey chill caught the earth, but then came the promise of dawn. And now the gate, that Prue would have known, was before them, with the odd little church on the

left of it, and the great pigeon-house on the right.

Here they left the car and hurried down to the sea.

A crowd was searching for the missing men, but they divided in silence for Colonel Wylde to pass.

"Have the bodies been identified, or others found?" he asked sharply.

"They are in the cottages yonder," said an old fisherman, pointing, and Colonel Wylde noted with surprise the Devonshire burr of an alien among the Welshmen. "Gentlemen from London say it's the duke and one of his sons, but they ain't certain about the other."

"Take me to them," commanded the colonel briefly, and the old man, who seemed stunned, mechanically obeyed.

Colonel Wylde stooped over the four torn bodies as they lay side by side, terribly battered by the rocks, and almost naked. One was scarcely like a man at all. It was a horrible sight.

"The duke and the eldest boy, without a doubt," he said curtly; then, repressing a shudder, he turned to that other, to the great, long,

strong, broken body of what had once been a fine man. They had covered the face.

He bent and examined each hand of the broken arms, and looked for a long, brown mole, and, all the time, sick and shuddering, he kept muttering to himself: "Broken like an egg; they break eggs like this!"

Then he dropped the hand. "This is not Captain Lascelles," he said, turning away; for there had been no brown mole on the dead hand. The other body was that of a small, swarthy man, evidently one of the crew, who lay side by side by a great duke, in equal honour.

"Several of the crew are safe," a young man informed him eagerly; "but there are still some missing, they say."

"Captain Lascelles and the duke's youngest son are missing," said the colonel. "Surely, if they were dead, their bodies would have been found by now."

Colonel Wylde turned and went back to the scene of the wreck, the old man keeping difficult step with him, his face grey and heavy with sorrow.

Someone told the colonel that the old fisherman was looking for his son's body; that the

young man had gone out with his boat fishing the night of the storm, and, just as he was due in, the gale had fallen on them, and there was little doubt the fishing boat had gone, too. But because there was no sign of the smaller boat in the midst of the floating wreckage, the man from Devonshire still hoped.

"Poor feller!" said the colonel compassionately; and he decided there and then that the old man should never feel the pinch of want, at any rate.

He strained his eyes over the mirthful waters, and a sudden flush of dawn arose, reddening the cold rocks, turning the seas into a sea of blood.

"What a grand sight!" exclaimed a London representative of the press.

The old fisherman looked at him with tired blue eyes. "Ay, grand for them as don't seek their bread upon the waters," he said with difficulty; "but the red is like blood to me," and he stared hopelessly at the jagged rocks, which had been red with the blood of drowning men not so many hours since.

The journalist looked at him quickly. This grim old man was "copy."

Suddenly a young Welshman came running

up to the sailor and shook his arm, exclaiming in his own language.

The old man answered in halting Welsh.

"What does he say?" asked the journalist anxiously, feeling for his note-book.

"My boy's boat has been sighted."

The press representative, who was mentally composing a moving paragraph about the old man who had waited by the shores of a sunrise sea for the boy who never came, tried to hope for humane purposes the son was safe. Then it dawned upon him he could have his picturesque story just the same, and his face cleared. He too ran forward.

When the boat became clearly visible, a man stood up, the rosy dawn illuminating his face. He waved reassuringly, calling out something no one could catch.

"It's John!" said the old man with a sound like a sob, and reeled suddenly.

Colonel Wylde caught him, and, holding him up, pushed a flask into the trembling old hands. "You'll need a pick-me-up, the pair of you," he said briskly, screwing his glass into his eye. "You would also do me a great favour if you would keep the flask. I'm glad he's safe."

"Thank you, sir," replied the sailor with

quiet dignity, valuing the flask not in the least because it had cost a very great deal of money, nor because it had been given by a "gentleman," but simply because it had been passed—in the right manner—from the hand of one man to another in a moment made big by unspoken sympathy.

"There's someone else in the boat, sir, someone off the yacht, surely, for that be no Penmon man. It may be your friend, after all."

Colonel Wylde ran eagerly forward, for there was indeed a stranger in the boat—and in another moment he had recognised Jim Lascelles, safe and sound.

He wrung his hand in silence, and then helped him to lift out the duke's youngest son, whose leg was broken, and thin, weak face drawn with pain and panic.

The story, as he learned it from two sources, was plain enough. Jim and his young cousin had been the first to be swept away when the crash came, and Jim had held up the lad's insensible form from sinking, and tried to swim away from the terrible rocks. Just as his strength gave out, and he was going down—still with the lad grimly held—a fishing boat had been swept into them by the force of the

gale. He had called out, and somehow he had got into the boat by the aid of willing hands with young Towersleigh, whose leg had been broken by the impact, and helped the two fishermen inside to force the smack out of danger. It had been a strenuous moment ere they rounded the lee of a rough shelter, but they had succeeded before the worst of the gale broke. They remained in harbourage tending to the injured lad as best they could till it grew safe to make for home.

"So you have thrown away the dukedom!" said Colonel Wylde after a moment, his voice very dry. It was all the praise he ever gave for an act of heroism, of which the hero, at least, was quite unconscious.

"You don't mean——" His dark face turned pale.

The colonel nodded. "Both! Bodies over yonder."

"Two grand dukes gone," said Jim after a long pause, "and . . . still, he's only a boy; this may sober him. How do you come here? Where did you hear?"

"I was in Mammoth Mansions when the newsboy called it out——"

"And she—Prue asked you to come?" A great light leapt to the young man's grey eyes.

"It was Jenny who suggested that, I think," the colonel replied a little awkwardly.

"I see. Miss Maunsell did not trouble? She said nothing—did nothing?" He looked out over the sea with eyes darker than the deepest gleam of it.

"She—well, she, as a matter of fact, you see——"

"Do not trouble to save my feelings. It was, of course, nothing to her. I quite understand what you mean. Do you by any chance mean anything else? Are you engaged?"

"Yes," said the colonel, growing confused. "I believe there *is* something of that sort. I am very glad about it—congratulate me. Of course, it surprises you. It surprised me, too. By gad! it wants a little bit of getting accustomed to!" He laughed happily, yet nervously.

"Yes," said Jim woodenly; "it wants a little bit of getting accustomed to," and he turned away rather quickly.

Colonel Wylde did not see him again ere he returned to London, and did not in the least realise there was any reason that he should, or any explanation necessary.

CHAPTER XXV

SOME few days later, Prue saw in the paper that the young duke was progressing favourably, and that Captain Lascelles had returned to Aldershot.

That very afternoon, curiously enough, she sat in the drawing-room window seat attired in her prettiest frock, and with her hair done in a new and very becoming way, much interested in the wild career of the motor-'buses, and even more interested in other less public vehicles. She sat there till it was too dark to see anything distinctly but the dazzling street lights below, then she got up and took off her dress, packing it carefully away.

When Jenny and Colonel Wylde came in to dinner, they exclaimed at sight of their hostess' new evening dress. "You *are* smart!" exclaimed Jenny. "So you've decided to go to the Howards, after all!"

"I have decided nothing," returned Prue very carelessly, and later she said she felt too

lazy to go out, and was going to finish her book.

"Oh, what a pity to waste your finery!" remarked the colonel, screwing his glass into his eye; "and we made sure you would chaperone us!"

"I shall have to allow you to go alone, after all, infants," Prue returned. "Don't keep Jenny too late. There's her beauty sleep to be thought of, and you know trousseau-getting is almost as exhausting as husband-getting—the necessary preliminary."

After they had gone, she sat with her book in her hand, but she couldn't have read much, for she held it upside down, and there was the look of one who listens on her face. She started more than once when through the half-open door she heard the ascent of the lift.

"I am like Marianna—ridiculous!" she thought with self-contempt that night as she put away her dress. "He has probably forgotten my existence."

It was a pity, because she had decided exactly how she would receive him. Rather coldly, though politely; then, if he urged the matter, she might unfreeze a little; and finally . . .

On the last day of Jenny's visit, Prue went with the engaged couple to inspect motors.

She straightway ran into Jim Lascelles, who was looking very well and brown after his yachting trip.

Prue extended her hand coldly. "Allow me to congratulate you on your escape," she said in her politest tones.

"Thanks," he said very briefly; then he saw, and greeted, Colonel Wylde. Jenny was a little distance away, hanging entranced over an electric landaulette, and was no more aware of the newcomer than Jim was of her.

"Take my advice, Lascelles," said the colonel jovially, "keep out of matrimony! It's simply ruinous. We are at present selecting a 'motor or so,' and of course the future Mrs. Wylde has an unerring scent for the most expensive."

"How sensible of her!" said Jim, but his smile was rather strained.

Colonel Wylde turned to Prue. "Look here, you take him round to the Mercedes we thought of, and ask his advice. I'll find Jenny and follow."

"But perhaps it would be detaining you, Captain Lascelles," said Prue.

"On the contrary, I shall be delighted, Miss Maunsell."

They discussed motor matters with an effort, growing every moment more formal, and Prue found her calculations somewhat upset, for she had intended to do all that was needful of icy distance herself, and he was usurping her prerogative.

It became unbearable. "Where is Colonel Wylde?" said the girl curtly. "We must be getting back."

"He is coming for you. If you will excuse me, I will leave you now, for I am keeping a friend—who is putting me up for the night—waiting. Good-afternoon, Miss Maunsell; you have my every wish for your success," and with his hat raised to her and a careless nod to the colonel, he had gone.

Prue bit her lip. "What did he mean?" she asked.

"Oh, the motor, perhaps, Miss Prue. Jenny says she'd rather have the dark-green, and the feller is waiting to drive us round. I say, I'm only just beginning to realise the pleasure of wealth."

"Which is to spend on someone near and dear, I suppose," answered Prue absently;

"and what should a husband find nearer and dearer than a wife?—his own, of course! I wish you had a twin brother. Then he should buy me that violent magenta car, and I'd rush round the country making people feel bilious."

"What a hurry Lascelles was in! There's a handsome chap for you! Pity he's so ineligible—confound that duke cub and Lascelles' idiocy! He's looking fit, eh?"

"Why shouldn't he? He's a fortunate man, isn't he?"

"Very short of cash, a beggar for the— There's that new American heiress who neither shrieks nor smells of pork—it might be a good thing."

"Very," replied the girl mechanically. She was feeling numb, but she knew the numbness would pass, and then would come the agony.

She looked forward to her return to Mammoth Mansions that evening with dread. After she had seen Colonel Wylde and his *fiancée* off by the Surrey train, she would be alone, for Jane had rushed off at the summons of a sister in domestic trouble, and Mrs. Stanley had gone with Mr. Chorley to stay with a mutual connection in the south. She was to become Mrs. Chorley at an early date, who Colonel Wylde

innocently supposed was a brother or cousin of the bushranger. There would only be Prue and Martha on the third floor that night, for the other flat was still empty.

When she stepped out of the lift, she was met by Martha, attired in bonnet and cloak, her face lugubrious.

"Oh, I thought you were never coming, Miss Prue, dear, and I was that put about! I didn't like to go till I'd asked you, though I knowed all along what you'd say. Oh, Miss Prue! poor Eliza Jane has just gone and had twins, and no help nor nothink——"

"Twins! how stupid!" said Prue rather crossly, feeling this was quite the last straw. Of course, Martha would have to go to the niece she adored.

"She might have waited a day or two!" said the injured beauty.

"I'm sure she would if she could, poor dear, for it wasn't expected till next week, and not twins at that, and nothink to hand, and Tom away——"

"Women are so precipitate!" remarked Prue angrily.

Martha drew herself up, and her honest face flushed. "Eliza Jane ain't nothink of the sort,"

she exclaimed indignantly; "kept herself most respectable always, in spite of yaller 'air, an' got an 'usband makin' thirty-two shilluns a week and agin' pubs, an' havin' married lines to show, and it bein' nigh a year since she were wed. There was never anythink like a precipice about Eliza Jane!"

"Certainly not," agreed Prue soothingly, too tired to explain. "Of course, you must go at once. I expect the twins are ducks."

"I don't know nothink about that," returned Martha coldly; "all *I* knows is they're the sort of twins a married woman, with lines a year back, has the right to have, without them what's been stayin' along o' folk no better than they should be, if they *do* live in castles and things and have titles, casting doubts upon their character, an' calling precipice-like, as if they'd come all in a hurry——"

"But I thought they did—you said yourself they were not expected till next week."

"There are hurries *and* hurries, Miss Prudence," said Martha severely; "and some is decent, and some isn't, and Eliza Jane was married the second of March, which it is nearly the end of February now."

"How nice if they are a boy and girl," said

Prue. "But, Martha, hadn't you better hurry? The housekeeper can look after me till you return."

"I shall be back Tuesday; and your dinner is keeping hot in the oven. I thought you wouldn't mind taking it out or ringing for Mrs. Wilks, but I'm sorry you'll have to sleep all alone on the floor to-night. Are you sure you won't be scared?"

"I don't mind in the least. Now, here's the lift up again. Do hurry, Martha!"

She ate a few mouthfuls of food and then went into the drawing-room and flung herself on the couch. So it was all over, and she did not care.

She had expected to care so very much that it was odd to feel nothing. There was only deadness, numbness, utter inertia, and a horrible sense of loneliness. The emptiness of the three silent flats got on her nerves, for Prue had not been formed for solitude.

Still the numbness held, realisation and suffering kept away, and she sat bracing herself to bear the thing when it should come. It was late when she went to bed, only to lie staring in the darkness, knowing sleep impossible, waiting for the frozen wound to throb. And then

all of a sudden it came—terrible, tearing agony.

She clenched her hands. "I cannot bear it! I *will* not bear it!" she cried fiercely.

A sudden thought of Sir Thomas came to her. Had the unhappy wretch endured torment such as this, and was that why he had put an end to himself?

For a moment a thought came, too, of a bottle of laudanum in her medicine cupboard—just a drink and then to sleep into nothingness.

She began to turn the subject over in her mind; it kept her from thinking of Jim, who had forgotten her, and slowly she got out of bed and unlocked the cupboard.

"It is nearly full," she mused, holding the bottle up to the light. "How much, I wonder?" Yet all the time she knew she would never kill herself while hope remained, and that she was only flirting with the idea of death.

She tried to remember what somebody had once told her about laudanum, something about only the right quantity being of any use. From too little one woke again, from too much one was outrageously sick.

"A few drops for sleep, a teaspoon or dessertspoon for death, and more for disaster,"

she wondered, and with a little sneer at the pathos of it all, she took several drops and got back into bed. For some moments the pain raged unslaked, and then came heavy sleep. Later she awoke with a pain across her eyes, a bitter choking in her throat, and she sat up still stupid.

"I have taken too much!" she thought, shrinking in sheer physical dismay.

And then the meaning of everything was plain—almost too plain. While she slept her drugged sleep, much had happened, and tragedy was likely, after all, to come of that bottle of laudanum. For there was a roaring as of the sea in her ears, the smell of burning everywhere, smoke and flames pouring in at her door, and alas! at her window too!

She got to the window, and for a moment managed to look down. There were triumphant flames running up, and in the little back street firemen helpless to aid. The crowd saw her, pointed to her, and a woman shrieked horribly. One of the firemen came a little way up the ladder, but he was beaten back before he got to the second story. He managed to shout to her to get to the front room and the balcony,

that the fire was less there, and the escape ready.

Then Prue, her face scorched with the heat, dropped back, and the woman screamed again.

Prue flung herself on her bed, for her feet were scorched by the heat of the floor, and tried to think quickly, clearly. But she could remember that flames were coming in through the window, pouring through the door, and that she could not touch the floor. Below there would be a furnace indeed, and presently—any moment now—the floor would fall in, and then . . . She watched a far corner of the room fascinated, for the flooring was giving . . . the red was there, too . . .

She understood it all so easily.

Long ago, while she slept her drugged sleep, the fire had started, the alarm sounded, the people been saved, none thinking of her in the confusion, or perhaps supposing her already in the street.

Her thoughts became inconsequent, absurd. "I wonder what the Chandler volunteer man looked like in his pyjamas?" she asked herself dreamily. "His legs would be worse than ever, or does he prefer the old-fashioned night-shirt? He looks that sort of a man." Then she

thanked God she had sent Beelzebub into the country with Jenny. She could realise he might be burned to death, but her own danger seemed an impersonal thing. Yet she could not escape by the door or the window, and the floor was so very hot in the corner where it was red, curling and crackling . . . it was rocking . . .

She wouldn't be able to be godmother to the twins, after all. And she had never thought to make a will. The money would go to Toby. Would it occur to him to pension Martha? Martha was growing old, and Prue had always intended her latter days to be easy. Would Jenny adopt Bub? "I do hope he won't repay her with more puppies!" she thought anxiously; "but she knows his little ways . . ."

Then something flashed across her; she forgot all but the horrible present. She was trapped—and she knew it. It was the one thing she feared—fire! Her thoughts had been running on traps, too—marriage traps. And she had always wanted to hear wedding-bells ring and the eager tread of the right man.

"And I'm too lovely to be burned!" she told herself indignantly. "What a wicked waste!"

To be slowly burned to death . . .

For the flames were gaining on the smoke; no blessed unconsciousness would be hers; no sleeping into eternal rest, but the war of a red agony. The fierce torture of hell!

She was glad she had never believed in hell, for she remembered much done and left undone. "I ought to have gone to church much oftener," she told herself. "Lots of people think that makes it all right." Her eyes grew wide and terrified; primitive physical horror tore her. And Jim . . .

He was in town, sleeping peacefully without a thought of her. Her fate was nothing to him; he did not care. She hated him. He could save the man who kept him from place and power, but she was of no account.

All his words of love were a lie. She was glad she hated him. It was easier to die with hate in the heart than love.

It was the easiest thing in the world to die—when one got accustomed to it. And then she laughed; the idea was so absurd.

"I shall never grow old and fat and ugly, after all," she said aloud, and tried to feel consoled.

Her thoughts veered round again. If Jim

had ever loved her he would not have left her to face such a terrible fate alone; at the worst, if he could not save her, he would die, too, teach her courage at the last—for he was brave. Death would have hurt less with his arms round her, his lips on hers.

But he had only thought he had cared for a day, and forgotten the day after; men were like that, and he was as the rest. There would be other women in his life; there might be one already. She could picture him with a fair, young wife, and children whose eyes were grey as the sea. . . . They would be his, but never hers; she would have been dead and forgotten, a piece of charred dust blown scattering by the wind, many a long dead year since.

For a moment the fire was forgotten, immediate terrible death became as nothing, as other flames, more fierce and terrible, scorched with primitive passion and agony, and she fell face downwards on the bed. her body writhing like the flames.

"Oh, God! oh, God! oh, God!" she cried aloud.

Then came a shout, her door was dashed open, there was a louder roar of flames, and a

blackened figure with fireman's helmet ran through them, blackened and bloody.

She was seized in an iron grasp, rolled unceremoniously upon her bed, swathed suffocatingly into her thick blankets.

A hoarse, roughened voice came to her through the flame and smoke. "Prue, be brave! Not a hair of your head shall suffer."

"I knew of course that you would come," she said calmly.

Then came the plunge through the furnace, the roar and smoke, and her rescuer staggered with her into the drawing-room, on to the balcony. The flames had been got under at the front of the house, and the descent was possible, if difficult.

As they reached the cheering crowd a great crash sounded, the back of Mammoth Mansions fell in, and Prue's bedroom was in the very heart of the fiery furnace.

Jim unwrapped the blanket and gazed into the girl's white face. "It is all right now," he said quietly.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, her voice rather sharp. "I thought I saw blood . . ."

"A slight cut on the arm from a piece of fall-

ing wood," he answered carelessly; "but it is not bleeding now."

"How did you know—and come?"

"I was driving back from a late bridge night at the club when I saw a light in the sky. I thought at once of Mammoth Mansions. And so I came."

"And so you came!" she echoed.

"The fire had raged hours, they told me, and the alarm had been given at once, so that people got away by the lift and stairs, and saved much of their property. But I could not find you, nobody could find you" He broke off suddenly, and his lips went white. He thought of that moment when it had seemed Prue's fate was only too horribly clear.

"How was I missed?"

"There was such confusion, it was difficult to say. Somebody remembered you were alone on the third floor, that you might not have heard the alarm, and then—then the fireman in charge at the back came and told us he had seen a lady at your window, and that——" He put his hand up to his collar. "So I got through the front," he managed to say. He did not think it necessary to add that the fireman had told him he was going to certain death.

But Prue knew, and her eyes shone suddenly with a great glow which had nothing to do with the reflection from the flames.

They were still standing alone in the midst of the crowd, the girl in the man's arms, one beautiful bare foot showing from below the blanket.

He could not put a shoeless girl down in the street, and he did not know where she would think of going, so he held her with quite unnecessary closeness, because he thought he would never hold her in his arms again.

For a moment he had shown all he felt as their eyes met, and the clasp of his arms told the truth.

Prue's heart sang with joy, and she nestled contentedly into the hollow of his neck, her masses of thick, loose hair against his throat.

"What a lot of trouble to take!" she said demurely. "Really, Captain Lascelles, I am under great obligations to you. What can I do for you in return?" and she laughed up into his face.

He did not laugh, and his clasp slackened a little. "I saved you for yourself," he said savagely, for he knew she was deliberately tempting him.

"And what would you advise me to do with myself?"

He set his teeth. "My life is yours. I gave you but your own; therefore you owe me nothing," and he turned his face away.

But Prue shamelessly flung her arms round his neck and clung to him. "Oh, you are great—so great!" she cried chokingly. "And I—I am not fit to black your boots, but I'd kill another woman if she tried to do it. It is true I can give you nothing . . . it was all given long ago, Jim—my Jim! So I have claimed your life, and you claim . . . nothing! Oh, Jim!"

He unwound her arms, thrusting her roughly back from touch of him. "What can I claim from Wylde's affianced wife—save dishonour?" he asked roughly.

For a moment there was silence, and then the girl understood.

So he had thought that, and that was why . . . And everything was clear.

She looked up at him with all-revealing eyes. "Colonel Wylde never admired me in the least," she said tremulously; "it was always Jenny. He has been engaged to her since the wreck time, and oh! what shall I do? For young

Stanley doesn't love me any longer, and Toby is going to marry a hydro widow, and—and sometimes I'm afraid I shall never catch a husband at all—and oh, Jim! what a pity I missed the Chandler volunteer in his pyjamas or night-shirt, because his legs, you know——”

But Jim, with a broken cry, had caught her fast, his lips closing on hers, and thus, through fire and flood, good repute and ill, with the roar of the flames about them, the heat glowing on their passionate faces, was their betrothal kiss.

“Darling, I'm glad you saved the dukelet,” she murmured inconsequently. “I worshipped you for it. And oh, Jim, you'll have to see me grow old and fat and ugly, after all, and I shall see you bald! Isn't it awful? And there's the pyjama man soberly *clothed!* Isn't everything quite too tiresome?”

He drew her in silence against his lips. “I've got you, and by God! I'm going to keep you!” he said triumphantly.

Reluctantly he took her to an hotel, still more reluctantly he parted from her, and, with no reluctance whatever, he married her a few weeks later.

CHAPTER XXVI

A LETTER FROM PRUE TEN YEARS LATER

OH, Jenny! don't ask me to write coherently about it. It's too lovely to be true, for fairy tales usually remain castles in Spain to the end, and then somebody throws bombs at them, and *puff*—it's all smoke!

Forgive my mixed metaphors, my mad clatter—forgive me because I am a duchess, and to her who is a duchess much shall be forgiven, and little taken away!

I cannot regret Towersleigh, or even feel a little sorry, for he did such a lot of harm, and had trampled the name in the mire, and Jim—well, *everybody* knows what he is, and respects him and loves him ever so—even his own wife!

And so I am coming home a duchess! What will my only-Jane say to that? I've written to tell her. She regards dukes and duchesses as people scarcely human; for instance, one can't

have insides or aches or things! And please tell Bub and the latest family. Really, at his age! And you thought that a nice little wife of his own would keep him at home, but it didn't. Of course it didn't. He still prefers his "club!"

When I heard I was actually the Duchess of Towersleigh, I made everybody call me "my grace" hundreds of times, so as I could get accustomed to the flavour of it—and it's nicer than strawberries in June.

Jim calls me "my grace" all the time, and I've already achieved the slight *blasé* air of "Oh, what a rotten nuisance it is to be a duchess!" I daren't be *too* dignified, lest I should get mistaken for an ex-chorus girl, whose dignity, à la the heroine on the stage, is a truly fearful and wonderful thing.

No more grillings in India. No more "how the dickens are we to pay our way?" and cross, worried husbands. No more anything horrid. And, above all, the little he-cub's with us again. Imagine! Jim, junior, is nine, and I haven't seen him for three years—the grubby little lamb! And he is the Earl of Framley, though he *would* tear his trousers, and Bobby is Lord Robert! In fact, they are personages, all of

them, and not horrid little grubs with smeared faces.

And Prue the second is a Lady! (There *are* people who thought her mother none—before she became a duchess.)

You see, when the second “misfortune,” which wasn’t in the least a “little one,” arrived, people didn’t *say* anything, but there was a sort of “don’t-do-it-again” warning under their congratulations. And this is quite one of the smartest, most up-to-date regiments going! And when the third arrived—the darling, all dimples—they *more* than hinted I was no lady, while on the fourth occasion they washed their hands of me, and when her Ladyship Prue, lovely as she was, came on the scene, they, guessing not that she was the daughter of an embryo duchess, said (to others) it was low.

Me they pitied.

“But why?” I asked the “deputation.” “I wanted her. I adore children; I’d like a hundred! I don’t want to be fashionable. I am so beautiful it is not necessary. And she is lovely, lovely, *lovely!*—the fairest baby in the world, and Jim idolises her because she is just me in miniature. When I am old and hideous, I shall have all the fun of seeing the men fall

in love with her as they did—and do—with me! And I wish she was twins! So put that in your pipe and smoke it!" I ended. (I didn't know I was going to be a dignified duchess, you see.)

But more in sorrow than in anger the "deputation" (who has one starveling, lonely child) answered: "*We* don't do that sort of thing. You have had five children in ten years. It's disgraceful!"

"But it might have been nine," I pleaded, "or ten—counting twins."

"I can only hope——"

"It will be a lesson to me?"

"The last time," she finished, going away (and with the last word, too).

Now, of course, the five "misfortunes" are five lordly personages, and I may even succeed in setting a new fashion and inducing healthy women, with suitable means, to have a "quiverful." Don't spoil your only child, Jenny! Never let him see he is the beginning and the end, for all the eggs are in one basket, and if they get broken or cracked there's no mending possible. It has always seemed to me that life is harder on the only child, and the snares for its feet are many and treacherous.

Dear, I have never thanked you for being a

second mother to my four rascals (the separation has been the one crumpled rose-leaf), but that sort of thing goes beyond thanks.

I love to think of my quartette playing with your boy, being rough and naughty as all boys should, and know that Jim can be proud of his manly sons.

I'm awfully sorry my Jim gave your Arthur a big black eye, but oh, I should have been sorrier if it had been the other way about!

I hope Colonel Wylde thrashed them both, but I expect—wise man!—he screwed his glass into his eye and told them to fight it out—and watched the encounter unseen, somewhere near!

And he would “think aloud” when one of them got in a good blow, and want to cheer them on. And of course they have been jolly friends ever since, as boys ever are.

My little Lady Prue is being packed just as hard as ever we can—rather under protest, I must own, for, unlike her duchess mamma, she isn't a lamb-like angel! I see you smile!

Jim is buying a certain ducal lady some wonderful Indian pearls, and everything is “just so.”

It's been rather hard work getting along on our united incomes in the —, of all regiments,

where even the poorest has £5000 a year, and many have been the quarrels Jim and I have had over each other's extravagances, for Jim *would* buy me clothes he couldn't afford, and jewels, while I bought him a couple of polo ponies which he took and sold back again (at a loss, too), and made me put the money to my account.

Wasn't it *beastly* of him?

I didn't speak to him for hours, and *then* I called him James!

He is perfect to quarrel with, and how people can endure the monotony of unruffled matrimony it beats me to understand!

So Mrs. Stanley that was is once more a widow, I hear, and now as Mrs. Chorley pursues the vocation most suited to her. How is it some women are born widows, others wives, others spinsters and suffragettes? For it is so.

I am glad Mrs. Stanley and Jane are going to live together again, but Jane is coming straight to the castle. Won't I make her eyes grow bulby with splendour! My honest only-Jane!

Thank you for telling me all the gossip.

So Peter's chorus-girl wife, and the devil-dowdger, who is now dodging without ceasing,

being near to the grand finale, have had an encounter!

"Why haven't you called any of your boys Peter?" says my lady, displeased. "Isn't their father's name good enough for them?"

"They are so like him it is not necessary," returns Mrs. Peter sweetly.

How delicious! Good for Mrs. Peter, who sowed her wild oats *previous* to marriage, unlike Lady Malden and her ilk.

And Miss Morris, in spite of sevens in boots, *has* got into a poor county family! *Poor* county family! Poor Mr. Morris!

I am glad Cupid married Mrs. Bretelle the moment he was free. And now he needn't shudder at the thought of Lent.

So everything ends as it should—and hardly ever does out of books—with Virtue being rewarded and made duchesses and things, and having pearls which will make the eyes of other duchesses (which can't compare, anyhow) bulge with envy. And they will gnash their teeth (mine are still my own) on account of my five little adorables, and one great perfect adored and adoring. He says I haven't lost my looks at all, and am more beautiful if it's

possible! I wonder if it is? And anyhow, a duchess below fifty is always lovely.

Lady Prue is packed, and the duke is swearing horribly in the next room, because "things won't go in—blast it!" (as if they ever did—blast it!), and I must go and soothe the troubled beast, and implore our perspiring servants to try again, and offer much back-sheesh. And this letter will only be home a few days ahead of my very self! Oh, it's too gorgeous! I do hope they'll have a brass band to meet us, and mayor and corporation and decorations!

Love to everybody, and oh! such heaps of love to my wicked little he-cubs with their grubby, Jim-like faces!

Tell Toby I'm coming. Oh, Toby and his Nonconformist baby, which isn't a godly infant at all! Shall you ever forget them? I suppose, though, he doesn't bite his father's nose any longer when he stoops to kiss him.

Shall you ever forget Toby's startled pride?

"There are not many babies of his age with such teeth!" says he, wiping the blood from his nose.

How we all shouted—except Toby! I never saw such awful suppressed (which *wasn't* sup-

pressed) pride; I thought he would burst! And isn't Mrs. Toby a brick, and hasn't she just *not* put the fear of the Lord into him, but taken it out of him! His mouth is quite human now. He might embezzle any day! I knew the world had turned upside down with my Toby-boy when he let the infant crawl over him with jammy fingers. Jammy fingers are absolutely the test where a man is concerned!

The duke still continues to say all manner of things he shouldn't say, and I, like a virtuous wife, fly to dam the duke (no, no, I don't mean *that!*).

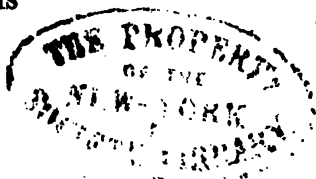
Good-bye for a few days. What is the latest way of wearing strawberry leaves, by the bye? Have the information ready to meet me with, please.

Ever your Grace-ious

PRUE.

P.S.—Jim says he doesn't believe I wear them, at all; only him. Aren't men selfish? Besides, what does it matter whether they are becoming or not? They will suit *me*, and make the other women mad, and—oh, I *must* go! He is saying it again. Good-bye, truly and really for the half of a week.

FINIS







shkarning

SEP 26

